THE WITCH of BAYOU PIERRE

by
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and
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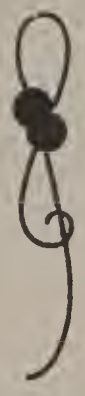

SOUTHWEST PRESS

Publishers in and of the Southwest

DALLAS, TEXAS

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MAR 30 1940

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I.

Near the open door of a weatherbeaten log cabin in the land of many bayous a shriveled crone sat huddled in a short-legged hide bottom chair. Small piercing black eyes peering from deep bony sockets seemed to dart over and beyond a small clearing about the place, and to rest broodingly on the dank edges of the swamp. They looked resentfully at the tangled under-brush that crowded to the very rim of the sun-baked potato patch as if reaching out octupus tentacles to recapture this pitiful striving toward civilization, and to drag back into somber boggy shadows.

The parchment like skin of the old woman was drawn across high cheek bones like hide stretched on pegs and dried by the sun. Lips caved in over toothless gums, worked and smacked continually. Quick bird-like movements of the weazened body proved that in spite of her years life in her was so unnaturally strong that it justified the name given her years ago, "The Witch of Bayou Pierre."

It was the month of April back in the early days of Louisiana, and the hot sun that had flamed

since early dawn with a heat known only to southern lowlands, was at last casting long lazy shadows across the cabin with its rickety gallery and honeysuckle vine. No clouds appeared in the hot brassy sky with promise of relief from the unusual heat that billowed in suffocating waves from the swamp and nearby canebrakes of the sluggish Bayou Pierre.

A slight movement within the cabin caused Madame Lisso to turn her hideous head with its quick bird-like twist, and ask in a weird unnatural voice.

"You, Asa?"

"Yah, man," came the answer in a strange cracked voice not unlike that of the old witch, and a moment later a freakish relic of a man wound out of the door onto the slanting little gallery and seated himself in the shade of the honeysuckle. His joints seemed bent and twisted with some malicious intent, and the wooly white whiskers which covered his entire face and neck and met the wooly white hair on his head, made him resemble an old ram, as much as Madame Lisso, his mother, did a picked and dried sparrow. Both were so extremely odd that it was difficult to believe age alone could have made such scare-crows of them.

At the age of fifteen Madame Lisso, of French-Irish descent had arrived in Louisiana with a shipment of girls who had been sent from France for the purpose of supplying wives for the colonists.

Homely past description even then, to the surprise of the beauties who had snubbed her on the voyage over, she was led away by Rechard Lisso, the handsomest and most debonaire Frenchman in the colony. Those who saw the unbelievable happen, declared there was witchcraft at the bottom of it. Thus, almost at the moment of her landing in this new country nearly a century ago, the name of *witch* had fallen upon this strange creature like a black mantle. Her weird appearance, and the many unexplainable happenings in or near the isolated cabin at the edge of the swamp, had deepened the belief in her uncanny powers. Indians had worn the little path deep coming for magic of the black art she practiced, while many of the settlers would ride miles out of their way to avoid meeting one of the Lisso family.

If the handsome Rechard was bewitched when he chose his ugly wife, the spell remained on him until death. Two children were born to this strangely mated pair. The son, grotesquely ugly as his mother, as a child was injured by a fall, from which he never fully recovered, and the years had fashioned him into this queer old man, now sitting in the shade of the honeysuckles. The little girl, Renee, born years later, inherited the dark loveliness of the Lisso women. Passionate love and thrust of a stranger ended her tempestuous life at the age of

seventeen. Heart broken, the kindly old Rechard was soon laid to rest by her side.

Renee's child was christened Sabine for the parish in which she was born, and from some throw-back in ancestry or, as many believed, from the witch blood in her veins, this child of a race of dark-skinned, dark-eyed people, was of unbelievable blonde fairness. At sixteen she stood out in shining contrast to the Louisianians of that day, whose swarthy skins ranged from negro to the creamy complexions of the French and Spanish settlers. The unaccountable blue-eyed fairness of the witch's grand-daughter had caused the ignorant to shun her, many to secretly fear her, and all to leave her alone save the Spanish family of Sepulvedor who lived several miles away on San Miguel Bayou.

The last red fingers of a vanished sun had faded, blotting out the still evening shadows, and a tropical twilight was deepening over the hard beaten path that led to the door of Madame Lisso's cabin, when a slight figure sped through the woods toward the home of the old witch. There was fright in those speeding feet as if some fearful unseen thing glided in pursuit.

The keen ears of Madame Lisso caught the sound of the swiftly running feet; her bleak talon hands ceased their nervous twining around each other. Perched upon the edge of her chair she became alert, her sharp ears, trained to distinguish noises of

the swamp . . . night noises . . . and sounds by day, caught a difference in the message of the darkening woods. A strange look crossed her horrid face, and with her uncanny sixth sense she half rose, clutching her shriveled breast. Stark terror sped those flying feet tonight. Once before during the past month the same difference had reached her listening ears, and now as she hurriedly rose and scurried to meet the flying girl, an icy hand seemed to clutch her heart. Her old eyes fixed piercingly on her granddaughter, as she bounded over the block step with tiny moccasined feet that hardly tipped it. Sabine's breath was coming in gasps as she clutched at the old woman.

"Quick! In the house, granny. Get in! He is out there again. He is there now. I saw his eyes watching me from the bushes."

She dragged the old witch inside the room and flew about closing the tiny shutters and the back door to the shed room where old Asa slept. Madame Lisso hopped about like a bird. She poked her head out of the door and whispered in her weird way to Asa half asleep in his chair.

"Whist! Git a pine-knot an fetch it quick, son."

Like one of the wild things he had lived among all his life, the old woodsman caught the warning in his mother's voice, and swiftly glided to the woodpile in the yard and back with his long arms filled with pineknots. As he entered the room the

door was quickly closed and the plank fastening shot into place. He went to the huge mud fireplace and stirring the ashes, uncovered the red coals upon which he placed the rich knot that smoked a moment, then caught, lighting the room with its leaping blaze. The sudden brightness made the old man blink with the astigmatic blindness of one long accustomed to darkness.

The girl Sabine made a beautiful picture in that crude room with its rough homemade furniture, smoked herb-hung rafters, and walls on which were all the queer things the old witch used in her artful machinations. The firelight played over her fairy-like face and braided hair which hung in ropes of molten gold to the hem of her short homespun dress. Great eyes surprisingly blue between black lashes, were fixed with frozen terror on the closed door as if waiting,—waiting,—dreading for it to open and reveal the object of her terror. The pine-knot fell apart with a crack that sounded like an exploding bomb and the girl started nervously.

"Set down, chile," said the old woman, reaching out with her claw-like hands and drawing her to a chair. Then she perched herself in the chimney corner. Her eyes disappeared far back in their bony sockets as she mouthed and mumbled in the strange voice nature had given her.

"Ma pore leetle chile, pestered by tha varment, tha black imp of satan. Snopin' aroun' ma cabin,

ferritin' out ma secrets. Lavin' tracks in ma garden. Alack-a-day, ma pore ole self. Plague take tha spawn uv satan, half-breed brat uv er squaw. I'll ram er toad down the black throat uv 'im. Pore ole me, pore ole witch. Did dast lay dirty hands on ye"

"No, oh, no, granny. He was in the bushes. His eyes were watching me."

Sabine's voice was keyed high with nervousness. Her frightened eyes constantly travelled from the closed door to the little shuttered window, then back to her grandmother and Asa nodding in the chimney corner.

"He started trackin' ye then?'

"Yes, granny. I felt him coming after me through the shadows. He is out there now—I can feel it."

"Guydo an' Marcelena had cum es fur es tha fork wid ye?"

"Yes, they had left me just a few minutes when I felt the eyes. I looked to one side—ough! Where could I hide? Oh, granny, shall I ever escape from the terror of the Trail?"

A terrible shudder ran over the slender body and the fair child-face, drained of blood, looked pinched in the firelight.

"Ye felt the evil eyes nigh tha ole ironwood tree?"

"Yes, granny."

Sabine paused in her nervous watching of door

and shutter to look at her grandmother. It was strange how granny could always read things just as they happened before being told about them. But her thoughts were wiped from her mind as a sound, more felt than heard, brought all three up with a start. No one spoke. Old Asa who often lived in the woods for weeks at a time had caught the sound and sat with wooly head thrown back, listening. The fire flickered eerily as the blaze began to die. The weird screech of a disturbed owl flapping its wings in flight over the cabin made the girl's blood run cold. Turning stiff fright paralyzed necks, they looked through the door of the cabin into Asa's shed-room. In the flickering light of the fire they saw the trapdoor in the floor of the shed-room open, and a man slowly crawl through it and rise to his feet. The figure advanced to the doorway, and leaning against it, calmly gazed at the silent little group.

"*Buenos noches!*" said Ocase Mataha in a deep gutteral voice.

In the silence Madame Lisso heard the impatient champ of horses and knew that outside waited members of the halfbreed's bandit gang. Ocase's keen black eyes, straight figure, black hair and reddish complexion indicated his Indian blood as clearly as his poise, regularity of feature and normal cheekbones betrayed his heritage from his white father.

"Good evening!" repeated the half-breed, his eyes traveling over the frightened Sabine.

"*Mon Dieu!*" screamed Madame Lisso, recovering the use of her cracked old voice. "Git, ye black savage devil. Lave us in peace, ye robber brat uv er squaw! What do ye mean by sneaking in on us like tha varment ye be? Git!"

"Quiet down, mammy. I am not here to kill you," replied Ocase in a carefully enunciated English which sounded strange on his tongue. "I fancy your granddaughter, and I mean to have her. She spurned my proposal on the trail so I must take what I want. I want her for my squaw. I come for her now!"

The old woman rose shakily and spat in the fire with startling vehemence.

"Niver will ye hev her, ye misbegotten son uv er white father," she cried, "lave us this instant or I'll put sich er spell on ye an yer gang as'll last ye ter yer dyin day! Git, afore I call tha dogs uv hell to drag ye away to yer destruction!"

The half-breed looked at her stolidly.

"Go frighten children with your threats, old woman!"

"Ye imupent brat uv er squaw, ye—"

With shaking hands Sabine motioned her grandmother to be quiet.

"Don't you see you are frightening my *gran'-mere*?" she said. "Please go!"

"When I go, you go with me," replied Ocase. "I have spoken to the priest and he awaits us. Come!"

With the easy springy step of a panther the Indian crossed over to the girl and seized her by the arm.

"Oh, *Gran'mere!* Asa! Don't let him get me!" Sabine screamed, frantic with terror.

Ocase drew her with him and started toward the door. A flash of understanding lit Asa's feeble brain. With the unexpected litheness of a cat he sprang from his chair and hurled himself snarling, biting and scratching, upon the Indian. Surprised at the suddenness of the attack Ocase staggered and released Sabine who ran screaming to her grandmother. Recovering himself, Ocase turned upon Asa and with a contemptuous push sent the old man crashing to the floor. Though stunned, Asa looked up in time to see the half-breed wrench Sabine from the clutching hands of his mother and turn again to the door. Into the half-crazed brain of the old man came but a single thought—kill, kill. Wobbling to his feet, he snatched up the overturned bench and made toward the halfbreed, who was now fumbling with the bolt while Sabine struggled and kicked in his embrace.

"Brain him, Asa, brain him!" shrieked Madame Lisso.

Warned by her outcry, Ocase wheeled. Whipping out his revolver and grasping it firmly by the bar-

rel, he brought the butt of it down upon the old mans' skull with a crash that stretched him unconscious on the floor. With a cry of rage Sabine snatched the Indian's hunting knife from its scabbard and tried to bury it in his side. Ocase grinned wickedly and imprisoned the girl's hands with an easy gesture. He thrust his face close to the tear-filled eyes of his captive.

"It's lawful marriage I offer you," he muttered, still speaking his careful English.

For answer Sabine bent her head and sank her teeth into his imprisoning hand.

"She-cat! Then Ill 'take what I want!"

Throwing her across his shoulder Ocase jerked open the door. The old woman flung herself forward to impede the exit of the bandit, but her feet became entangled in her long dress and she fell to the floor as Sabine, screaming, was borne away in the darkness toward Natchitoches.

Hours later when dark clouds had blown up and the wind howled against the cabin a shrunken old woman sat staring into the gray embers on her hearth. Had Ocase carried Sabine before a priest for lawful wedding or had he . . . .

Her long fingers laced and unlaced in her lap.

"The seventeenth!" she murmured. "The seventeenth. I'll send him and his gang to hell for the doings of this seventeenth."

Asa sat weeping beside the dying fire, his beard

and hair stiff with drying blood. Puzzled he watched his mother seize a bit of charred wood from the ashes and in wavering black letters write the figure seventeen on the board above the fireplace.

"The seventeenth!" repeated Madame Lisso as she formed the figures.

"Seventeenth, seventeenth," repeated Asa as he rose and stumbled off to the shedroom.

II.

In 1788 the first rumblings of the storm that was to become the French Revolution began to disturb the calm of Europe. Ancient dynasties sat apparently secure on their thrones; landed aristocrats frolicked their privileged way through endless court gayeties; wealthy middle classes continued to buy and sell, and amass riches. The first faint murmurs of the cyclone were almost unheeded. A year later the hurricane broke in all its fury. Reverberations from the storm center swept from Paris in ever broadening circles until the entire continent was involved in the clash of ideas, the war of irreconcilable political systems, the destruction of aristocrats, the volcanic fall of ancient dynasties and the sudden rise of new.

Spain no less than France entered upon three decades of unprecedented turmoil, suffering and war. Many a grandee of Madrid and noble of Paris, lost life and property in the almost universal cataclysm. Early in the titanic disturbance that raged in Europe Don Leon Francesco Sepulvedor, his fortune destroyed and his ancient patrimony wrecked,

cast longing eyes to America. Perhaps within its deep forests he might find the peace which had deserted Europe; on its broad virgin acres he might recoup the fortunes so depleted by the exigency of the time. In Spanish America he might recover all he had lost in old Spain. Therefore, early in the 1790's Don Leon left Madrid, with Amata his young French wife, and their two children, Guydo, a boy of seven, and Marcelena, a smiling babe of less than a year, he sailed across the Atlantic to New Orleans.

Fired by the tales that he heard of the beautiful bayou country, the productivity of its soil, and the wealth to be gained in the cultivation of indigo, tobacco and rice, the intrepid Spaniard with his family journeyed northward over the Spanish Trail. Undeterred by the dangers of the country, undaunted by the reported depredations of bandits, and unfrightened by the unsettled state of the country, Don Leon pushed to Natchitoches, the oldest Spanish town in that section of Louisiana. This old settlement on the Red River pleased him. Some distance beyond Natchitoches, in Sabine Parish, near the little fort of Spanish Town the adventuring Don settled and built himself a log cabin.

His new home was on the Bayou San Miguel within a stone's throw of a branch of the Spanish Trail. Originally a one-roomed hut, the Don had

added to the structure as the years passed and success came to crown his efforts. Spanish to the very core he saw Louisiana shuffled back and forth between France and Spain as a pawn in the political game played by Napoleon. And now, in his advancing old age he had lived to witness the entire territory of Louisiana pass into the possession of the United States by act of the Corsican tyrant.

A few days before Christmas, 1803, William C. C. Claiborne, late Governor of the Mississippi Territory, hoisted the American flag over the Cabildo in New Orleans. By this act the United States took formal possession of the Louisiana Territory. In March of the next year Congress passed an act which provided for the government of the newly acquired lands. The northern part, which embraced Missouri, the only inhabited section north of New Orleans, was made the District of Louisiana; the southern portion, which roughly embraced what is now the state of Louisiana, was called the Territory of Orleans and placed under the temporary administration of the President of the United States, who was authorized to exercise all the military, civil and judicial powers previously exercised by the officers of the French and Spanish governments.

The precise limits of the Louisiana Territory were not described in the Treaty of Cession. Consequently Spain and the United States found them-

selves in dispute over the ownership of that area lying between the Red and Sabine Rivers. This disputed section was called the Neutral Strip. To the south and west of this No-Man's Land lay the domains of His Catholic Majesty of Spain; to the north and east extended the territories of the infant but lustily developing United States. Each nation recognized the value of the disputed area and each attempted to exercise sovereignty over it. American and Spanish troops marched and counter-marched through the Neutral Strip. The agents of each country endeavored to win the allegiance of the scattered inhabitants to their respective flags.

Pending the settlement of the exact boundary between their possessions, Spain and the United States, as a compromise measure, agreed that Marcel De Soto, reputed a descendant of Hernandez De Soto, should exercise temporary governorship over the section until its final status should be determined.

With the political government too weak to adequately protect life and property, the Neutral Strip became the rendezvous of outlaws, marauding Indians and half-breeds, who preyed almost at will upon the scattered inhabitants of the deep forests and swampy bayous. The quiet creeks, impenetrable swamps, tangled canebrakes, and rolling hills offered shelter to the lawbreakers, and

as a result, the area between the Red and Sabine Rivers became a center of outlawry.

In 1803-04 there was no more beautiful section in all Louisiana than this Neutral Strip. It was a land of bayous, those meandering waterways, half creek and half lake, which lay like gleaming jewels amid the forests. Through the jungle of the Neutral Strip from Natchitoches on the Red River, to San Antonio, Texas, ran the wavering Spanish Trail. Colorful even in the beginning, this lonely old trail of blood and romance owed its tortuous route to the stealthy gliding of savage feet in the days before the gallant De Soto was buried in the rolling waters of the great river he discovered. With the coming of France and Spain to this country, the old trail took on added glamor as over it passed French noble and Spanish grandee, each striving to add to the crown of his sovereign a new American jewel. Behind them came adventurer and priest, *coureur de bois* and trapper, settler and Indian half-breed to write deeper the marks of the trail, and to paint with their violent contrasts, the colorful pageantry which history was unfolding in this section. The marks of this famous Trail, or trace as the roads were then called, date back as far as the second decade of the eighteenth century and are still to be found in many places where the natural beauty of Louis-

iana has been spared by the destroying hand of civilization.

At the opening of the nineteenth century, however, the Spanish Trail was in its prime. Then along this artery flowed all the life of the period. Pack train or mules out of the Spanish Southwest trotted along the Trail toward the mighty Mississippi and the port of New Orleans; traveler and adventurer, putting the river at their backs, passed over the Trail in the opposite direction to the great south and southwest where adventure lurked. And along the way skulked the bandit ready to rob and to kill.

Beyond Natchitoches the Trail snaked its way southward toward New Orleans. It wound its sinuous curves along the banks of great swamps where mighty oaks, festooned in gray Spanish moss, gazed pensively, like monks in trailing robes, at their reflections in bayou and creek. Back and forth it bent through canebrake and swamp, meandering before the doors of the humble cabins of the settlers in remote parishes and then disappearing in the gloom of the forest.

It was to this land of beauty and romance that Don Leon brought his little family. Though he hid himself away in the wilderness Don Leon had not neglected the education of his two children. He taught them himself, and from his lips Guydo and Marcelena learned to speak perfect Spanish

and English. Their mother, not to be outdone, taught them the beautiful tongue of her beloved France. Thus, almost immured in the deep forest, the young Sepulvedors were as highly educated as any children of their rank either in New Orleans or Madrid. Lest his growing daughter suffer from lack of companionship, Don Leon had invited Madame Lisso, his nearest neighbor some miles away on the Bayou Pierre, to let her granddaughter, Sabine, attend the school he taught. And it was in the home of the Sepulvedors that the little Creole beauty gained a knowledge of books and of English and Spanish. Day after day for several years she had appeared dancing along the path to the Sepulvedor home, like a golden butterfly flitting through the forest wildness and into the hearts and lives of the proud Spanish family on the Bayou San Miguel.

In the late evening Senorita Marcelena stood looking from her shuttered window into the deepening twilight, listening to the drip-drip of a slow rain which had begun on the night of the seventeenth and still came down steadily from the low overhanging clouds. Darkness was falling early over the San Miguel woods, blotting out the cool amber lights that lay deep in the slumberous gray eyes of the senorita,—eyes made vastly darker by the inky lashes that matched the gleaming hair which lay on her head like blackest night. The

beauty of the senorita was compelling, exotic, as tho the Latin blood of her illustrious Spanish ancestors had concentrated in her veins to make this daughter of old Madrid a fair representative of them in the alien country to which she had been transplanted.

It was of Sabine the Senorita Marcelena thought as she stood at the little square window. Blackness descended first on the woods across the bayou, then crept quickly over the magnolias and oaks in the yard. The young girl was awakened from her dreaming by the entrance of her soft eyed little mother. The pale rays of the lighted candle in her hand showed her to be still of a petite prettiness in spite of long, hard years in the settlement. She held the candle high, searching the room with anxious eyes.

"Ah, there you are, mooning at the window. Father and Guydo have finished eating and wonder where you are hiding this long time."

"Ho-hum, *madre mio,* the end of another day and still it rains. Such a noise the bayou is making. I love the sound of it when it goes on rampage and rumbles as it does tonight. I dream the strangest things. Sabine and Guydo hate rainy days and never, never will they go near the swamp when it is shady and dark. Amata, do you think Sabine will come tomorrow?"

"I think she will come. It is very wet in the

woods, *ma amie,* only if the sun shines will she come."

"But, Amata, *favorito,* the rain never keeps her away from us three days. She will come in the morning."

"Well,, then, please, it is late child, come and eat your supper now."

There was a deep, troubled look in Amata's eyes as she turned and led the way for this child, a head taller than herself, with her queer moods so little understood by the tiny French woman.

They passed through an unceiled hallway which led to a large kitchen at the back of the house. There Don Leon sat smoking a cigar of home-raised tobacco, talking earnestly to his tall, dark-eyed son whose wet hunting clothes steamed in the heat of a bright wood fire. In the huge mud fireplace with its pots and ovens, Amata did the family cooking. Tonight she dished up a bounteous supper of o'possum and potatoes, lye hominy and gumbo for her daughter. Marcelena sat down and ate, seemingly unnoticed by the two before the fire. The pounding of the slow rain on the roof of the homey old kitchen and the roaring of the overflowing bayou drowned the sound of their voices, and Marcelena again fell a-dreaming. Her strange eyes, with fires of passion in their gray depths, looked witching in the soft firelight as her thoughts drifted further and further away. In

her preoccupation she failed to note the troubled glances cast in her direction by the family. She helped Amata clear the table and quickly left the room, much to the relief of the others who seemed laboring under an emotion which, by common consent, they strove to hide from her. As soon as the door closed behind her the old don leaned nearer Guydo.

"Did Pierre say he heard this at Spanish Town?"

"It was raining and thundering so I could scarcely catch his whispered words, father. I cannot recall, however, that he mentioned Spanish Town."

"Well, if he had said he heard it at the fort I would be inclined to doubt the truthfulness of it. The fort is a hot-bed of gossip and lies. Every rumor good or bad, true or false, originates at Smith's Tavern."

The don's Spanish blood was fired and his fine old eyes blazed with strong feeling.

"Peirre said it was whispered along the Spanish Trail, but no one dares go near enough to Madame Lisso, or Ocase either, to find out. They seem to fear one as much as the other."

"I can hardly believe Madame Lisso with her keen intuition or whatever it is called, would allow that Indian dog to outwit her in such a thing as this."

Guydo looked at his father as if striving to absorb some of the hope his words held, but some-

thing in his very soul seemed to say this terrible thing was true. The dark tragic look in his son's eyes filled Don Leon with a passion of anger. He arose and strode back and forth about the kitchen, denouncing the country where such a thing could happen. At last he sat down, puffing and blowing, and swore.

"*Dios!* I shall write the governor if this last outrage has been committed. We have reached the limit in Louisiana. We have no law or protection from this daring gang of outlaws, and yet there are the finest people in the world right here in Sabine Parish who are simply terrorized by the bloody trail this gang has made through our state."

Amata rocked back and forth, her eyes large and troubled.

"It seems that something must always happen to that Lisso woman. She seems only born for great troubles. But I so hoped little Sabine would escape. *Dieu!* For the old grandmother my heart aches."

"There, now, *amie,*" said the don, patting his wife's hard little hand. "It may not be true after all. *Dios!* I hope not."

"What do you know of this Indian, father? They claim his gang is composed of all sorts of men, from whites to the lowest Indians and Mexicans. Where do his brains come from? No ordi-

nary redskin could plan with the judgment he uses."

"You are right, *hijo mio.* Ocase Mataha is no ordinary Indian. He is the half-breed son of a Chickasaw squaw and a white father. In all the history of Louisiana there was never a more notorious criminal than William Augustus Bowles. He was born in Maryland but took arms with the British against the American colonies in their fight for independence. Bowles had a most unusual personality; cruel, cunning, deceitful, but a suave talker. He charmed the King of England with his flowery speeches, and as an actor, he made a tremendous success on the stage of New York. Pirate, actor, thief, murderer, whenever hard pressed by the law, Bowles would fly here to Louisiana to hide. Then would begin a reign of terror for the settlers. During one of his periodic stays in Louisiana he lived in a Chickasaw village. There he married a daughter of the chief and became the father of Ocase Mataha. Bowles was captured many times but made many sensational escapes. Once he obtained his release by gnawing in two the ropes with which he was bound. However, the Spanish finally captured him, and enraged by the long calendar of his crimes, they imprisoned him in the dungeons of Moro Castle at Havana, where he died.

"From his white father Ocase Mataha inherits

his brains, his cool calculation, and from his Chickasaw mother, his cruelty, cunning and blood-thirstiness. His career has been almost as famous as that of his father. He has lived in Spain, he has moved about in the best circles of Madrid and he has visited Paris. Thus his naturally sharp wits have been schooled to even greater cunning. He is the most dangerous criminal in Louisiana, but he will meet his deserts and die for his crimes, even as his father did before him."

The thunder which had muttered ominously all day began again with increasing fury, and lightning flashes lit the dark woods for miles, rain began to fall in sheets on the thin roof of the log house. Amata finally rose and with a deep sigh told them to go to bed. After covering the hot coals with ashes and securing the shutters and doors the men obeyed her.

"Guydo, in his back room, stood long at the open window. Somewhere out there in the sombre blackness of the woods was the woman he loved. The shadow of grim fear that the morrow would confirm the truth of the terrible rumor that had travelled to them through the rain overwhelmed him. But hope dies hard in the young and the wet gray dawn found him up and dressed. He must learn the truth and end his horrible suspense.

Later in the day, when the sun was beginning to pour golden streams through the ragged rain

clouds, a boy and girl turned their horses from the Spanish Trail into the path which led to the home of the witch of Bayou Pierre. Marcelena was not weeping now. The storm of tears had dried, and left her gray eyes wide and dark at the thought of the tragedy that might have overtaken her happy carefree friend. Like her father she longed for revenge swift and terrible, but the mild tempered Guydo held no such thoughts. His one aching desire was to find it all untrue, and Sabine, *his* Sabine of the dancing blue eyes, safe in the little log cabin by the swamp. Marcelena led the way at a swift canter over the wet pine needles which covered the trail through the draggled woods of late summer. It was a good hour's ride from the Spanish Trail to Madame Lisso's. The sun shone hot and steaming on the wet woods before they drew up in front of the cabin.

As they approached the house they could see the familiar figure of Granny Lisso huddled in her low chair on the rickety gallery. She was so shrunken that they had to look hard to see if she was really there. Her flapping old sun bonnet was pulled low over her weazened face and she watched them in motionless quiet as they rode to the gate and dismounted. Then, as if the memories they aroused were more than she could bear, she began waving and flapping her bony hands at them, her shrunken frame trembled with her sobbing.

"Ye ha come ta late, ta late, ta late."

Marcelena ran up the path and stood over her, patting and soothing; she pulled off the dilapidated bonnet and through tear dimmed eyes looked into the grief stricken face.

"Now, you hush, granny. It is not too late, not ever too late. Just stop and tell us what happened. Father says to tell you not to worry too much; he is writing to his good friend, the governor, and we are going to get Sabine back for you."

"Ye tell yer pap tain't no use. 'Tis in ma ole heart thet ma Sabine comes ta live no more in tha home of her ole granny. Don't ax how meself knows . . . tis plain ez day—tha Indians never give up tha white gals."

"There you are wrong, Granny," answered Marcelena in a cold, hard voice. "Ocase Mataha is no God that he may do this thing. I would wager my life he is a coward at heart and he will be brought to justice. I have no patience with settlers of Sabine Parish for permitting themselves to be preyed upon month after month by this low half-breed and his followers.

Her cold flashing eyes turned to Guydo sitting silent on the edge of the gallery. He thought, as did Madame Lisso, that it was too late. The swamps and woods had taken Sabine; for the Indian, like the slinking and crawling animals which

dwelt in their dark recesses, knew places where white men never ventured; unless old Asa who knew no fear of the swamps, might have wandered over them. Guydo's hope was dead, and the death of Sabine would have been joy compared to the thought of her at the mercy of the half-breed.

"Guydo! Do you know who he is . . . Guydo!"

"Who is who . . . what do you mean?" he asked, realizing that his sister had twice repeated his name.

"That rider," she replied nodding toward the clearing.

Guydo saw a man on a great horse with a slick black coat that shone in the sunlight, coming slowly along the path toward the cabin. His curious eyes took in the horseman from the stiff sombrero to the *zapitees* on his feet. The stranger reined in his horse before the gate, and with graceful ease swung his tall form to the ground. Seeming to reach the gate in one long stride, he came up the path looking about curiously. A sword hung in its scabbard at his side and the handle of a pistol protruded from a holster at his hip. As he neared the steps he stopped and glanced from one to the other of the three before his dark serious eyes rested upon the old woman.

"Have I the honor of addressing Madame Lisso?" he asked in Spanish.

Realizing that he spoke to her, Madame Lisso turned to Marcelena inquiringly.

"The senor wishes to know if he is speaking to Madame Lisso," she repeated in French to the old witch. Then, turning her strange lovely eyes on the *caballero* she explained.

"Madame Lisso speaks no Spanish, senor,—only French and English."

A smile softened the stern face of the stranger as he bowed his thanks. This surprisingly lovely Spanish-American with so cultured a voice aroused his curiosity.

"I thank you, *senorita.*"

Dragging his gaze from the face of the loveliest woman he had ever seen, he let it fall to the grotesque ugliness of Madame Lisso's sparrow-like face with its sharp animal eyes watching him from their bony sockets.

"My name is Bon Villon. I live in the Dolette Hills and my nearest neighbor is Ocase Mataha."

In the south to call a man neighbor is to call him friend. The little group on the gallery stiffened in hostility.

"Ocase Mataha wishes me to say to Madame Lisso that her granddaughter is safe and well at his home in the Dolette Hills. She was married to him yesterday morning in the cathedral at Natchitoches. Father Buren performed the ceremony."

If he had announced to them that Sabine had cut her fair throat their shock and amazement could have been no greater. To be a victim of the half-breed was one thing, but to be married to him in the holy Catholic church was another. The cunning Indian had done the one thing that bound the girl to him for life. Unable at first to absorb the terrible meaning of the message they gazed at its bearer in silence. Gradually Bon Villon saw hope die in the wondrous eyes of the girl, and the rigidity that had held them frozen for the moment melted in futile helplessness. When the stranger's glance encountered the eyes of the youth he was startled at the cold suspicion and dislike he saw there, but it was the flaming contempt in the eyes of the young girl that made him curse the misfortune of his errand here today. This was the first time he had felt such contempt, in a woman's eyes, and a dull red crept up his neck and under the bronze of his handsome face. Not a muscle of his face changed, however, and he made no effort to change the opinion they had so hastily formed of him. He met their hostile looks with dark brooding eyes that held no shame.

Madame Lisso was the first to recover. She clawed the sun bonnet back from her weazened face, and gave the tall Spaniard a long keen look, as if reading the secrets of his very soul.

"The hook-nosed thief scart ma leetle gal into

marriage. She stays by him now; that he sensed, tha cunnin' son uv tha devil. I have a leetle bundle ta sen' her, ma son. Be ye goin' that er way?"

"Yes, Madame Lisso. I shall be only too glad to carry any bundle or message you wish to send," the stranger replied gravely.

"Wait ye then son, an I fetch hit."

With this she hobbled into the cabin leaving a frozen silence behind her. Bon Villon's eyes glanced about the yard as though unconscious of Marcelena's scornful silence, but beneath this seeming indifference he was wondering how these two proud-eyed aristocrats came to be here with this queer old relic of the backwoods.

The morning sun poured a golden light over the rich velvet of his vestidura, and Marcelena forgot her resentment for a moment in the thought that he was the Spanish cavalier of her day-dreams. She had never seen his like before. With a sudden glance, the caballero caught the unguarded look in her eyes and the rosy flush that mounted to the roots of her gleaming black hair. At this moment Madame Lisso came from the cabin with a small bundle in her shriveled hands.

"Theese be her clos', senor, an theese . . ." She unwrapped from a mullein leaf a dried rabbit's foot, so old it was pithy, with most of the hair worn off from much use in conjuring. "Thees, my son, be tha lef' hin' foot uv tha rabbit co't by

me own self from tha graves in tha dark uv tha nicht. Lay hit in tha hand uv ma leetle gran'-daughter an bid her kape it nigh at all times." She rewrapped it and gave it to him. "Ye hav' set yer trap in the richt place, senor. Lie low—bide yer time and ye'll git 'em. But watch—Go now an kape a close watch on ma leetle gran'darter." With these strange words she turned and hippety hopped to her chair, sat down and pulled her sun bonnet close over her face.

Bon Villon looked after her, surprise written on his face. Her strange words had touched some vital spot he had believed known only to himself. Then as if grateful for her faith in him he answered gravely:

"Thank you for your trust Madame Lisso, and rest assured I shall merit it. I bid you good day and hasten to deliver your message."

He bowed to them all as he said goodbye, but his last glance was for Marcelena, a sweeping look of mockery—as tho' he smiled inwardly at the narrow minded part she had played. His glance, fleeting though it was, caused her a feeling of shame as she watched the long swinging strides that took him down the path to his horse. Gracefully he leaped into his saddle and without looking back rode swiftly over the clearing and disappeared in the woods.

As the trees closed in on him, Marcelena stood

silent, preplexed, her eyes on the spot where he had vanished. Reason told her he was unworthy, and that he received the kind of treatment he deserved as messenger for the odious half-breed. Her woman's intuition, however, told her something else again. A provoking feeling of uncertainty assailed her. She turned to look at Guydo who was showing his astonishment at the friendly attitude Madame Lisso had assumed towards this mysterious friend of Ocase.

"Your feeling for Ocase must have undergone a sudden change, Granny, from the flattering treatment you accorded his self-confessed friend. This Senor Bon Villon is, for all we know, the brains of the outlaw gang . . . He may even have helped to steal Sabine!"

"Nay, ye wrong Senor Bon Villon, Guydo." And there was absolute certainty in the witch's voice.

"Don't let the handsome rascal take you in, Granny. He is bad, and bold with it. He and his half-breed friend may yet hang from the same tree. They will for a certainty if he continues to go about so frankly admitting their relations." he persisted bitterly.

"Na, ma son, I done tole ye thet ye be wrong. Tha Senor ha his sacrets, but not whut ye air thinkin. Git ye a cheer, honey." she said, turning to Marcelena who stood listening closely to

what they said. Perhaps Madame Lisso was right—she usually was, the *senoretta* was thinking: suddenly, she found the gloom of the day had vanished.

III.

All night Guydo Sepulvedor had tossed on his bed. Not once had his eyes closed and not once had he been able to free himself from the pain that gnawed at mind and heart. The story told him by Madame Lisso the day before, and the unexpected appearance of Senor Bon Villon with his announcement that Sabine was married to Ocase Mataha, had changed him in a single day from a careless high strung boy flushed with the first stirrings of love, to a tortured serious eyed man. With the easy vision of youth he had dreamed that in the fulness of time, he and Sabine would marry, build themselves a new home not far from his father's cabin, and start a family of their own. But now . . .

A cry rose in his throat. Within the past twenty-four hours he had seen all the rosy dreams of his youth shattered. Sabine, his sweetheart, she with whom he had walked from school evenings without number; she whom he had taught the secrets of the woods, was now the squaw of the repulsive Ocase, sharer of his bed, to be, perhaps,

the mother of his children—Sabine, unhappy, mistreated . . .

Guydo dug sharp nails into his moist palms and rolled restlessly under his sheet. Neither he nor his father could hope to match themselves against the half-breed who was the terror of the district. If they attempted vengeance they would be annihilated, swept from his path by a single blow of the bandit's arm. If only the Spanish authorities would send troops to apprehend the robber gang, or Governor Claiborne could be persuaded to send United States soldiers from New Orleans to punish the outlaw who defied the authority of both nations, and robbed at will the citizens of each.

Unable longer to endure the torture of his thoughts the lad arose stealthily, drew on his moccasins, and with sombrero in hand, stole noiselessly through the cabin. As he passed the fireplace he took his rifle from the hooks above, for, during that critical time, no male dared venture beyond doors unarmed.

The first pale streaks of dawn were staining the eastern sky as he stood on the gallery. With a quick glance about him, Guydo ran down the dew-covered path to where the little Bayou San Miguel poured over flat limestone rocks into a crystal pool. Here he paused long enough to dash the cool clear water into his feverish eyes, before he forded the shallow stream, and with the

long easy stride of the woodsman, pushed on down the Spanish Trail. The interlocking limbs of the old oaks cast an eerie darkness about him. In the cool dim aisles of the trees, beside the quiet swamp waters, he would cool the fever in his blood and find relief from thoughts that tortured.

As he plunged deeper into the forest the sun came up. The light shot down through the trees, in faint lancelike shafts which illumined the darkness rather than dispelled it; but, as the sun gathered strength, came in broader beams until the shadows were vanquished and full day was upon him. Time and hunger forgotten, Guydo plunged on, his mind still going in a vicious circle.

At noon he found himself in the vicinity of Fallen Springs. Thirsty and tired by his long tramp he turned aside to drink from the cool waters of the springs. On hands and knees he knelt and drank, his lips ruffling the mirror-surface, then rose and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. A sudden thought came to him. What would his mother and sister think of his sudden departure? He felt all the young man's dislike for admitting disappointment in love, but his mother would look questioningly at him, would make inquiry. He shrugged his shoulders impatiently, well he would say he had scouted about in the woods.

As he turned to retrace his steps toward the

trail, his ear caught the sound of a horse. He quickly glanced about. The rider might be any one of the numerous ruffians who roved the woods to rob and kill. Behind him was the spring, in front the path down which the unknown was coming. With a quickness natural to him, the lad climbed a tree and crouched motionless thirty feet above the spring in the thick foliage.

Eyes alert, muscles tensed, Guydo waited. Nearer and nearer came the sounds. A sorrel horse turned the bend in the Trail, and with a sudden quickening of his pulse, the young man recognized Ocase, the newly made husband of Sabine.

The Indian dismounted and his quick eyes caught the faint imprint left by Guydo's moccasin. Bending forward he studied the prints carefully, his eyes followed the marks to the spring, paused at the prints of hand and knee where Guydo had stopped to drink, and retraced them until they were lost in the underbrush.

"Ugh! Indian!" he grunted.

With a little sigh of relief Guydo thanked fortune he had worn moccasins, and relaxed the finger poised on the trigger of his rifle. Apparently satisfied that he was alone, Ocase whistled shrilly. The signal was answered from the woods and in a few moments a gang of fourteen or more white men with a few Indians joined the waiting leader. Ocase began to address his men, but though

Guydo listened intently, he could not distinguish his words. Occasionally he caught the name of Bon Villon, but it was quickly lost in the smother of Spanish and Indian the men were whispering to each other.

"This morning I met a pack train near Natchitoches," said Ocase, finally raising his voice. The half-breed could, with the most surprising abruptness change from the impassive stolid Indian, to the fluent gesticulating Spaniard—a result of the curious blend of the two races in his veins. "The leader of the train was frightened. He thought me a robber. I quieted his fear by telling him I was a Spaniard on my way to Natchitoches with a dispatch to the Spanish commander, and showed him the letter from Don Herror which we took from the dispatch-bearer we captured in the woods last week. After I learned the route of the train I made my escape and summoned you. It's the richest load of hides and silver that's been along the trail. We hide about in the bushes—They come. Ough . . ."

Ocase had heard something! He motioned for silence. The outlaws became as statues. Then the sound of a horse's step reached them. At a nod from Ocase the gang disappeared behind tree and bush, and left their chief alone by the pool.

Tense, Guydo peered between the branches of the tree. Down the trail rode Senor Bon Villon.

He was in red velvet, and the silver ornaments on his coat winked as the alternate patterns of shadow and sunlight fell upon them.

Ocase hailed him.

"Hey, Cap! Hunting?"

Guydo started. For many hours he had been puzzling his brain to arrive at the relationship between the half-breed and the Spaniard. When he first met him at Madame Lisso's, Guydo was convinced that the handsome stranger was in league with the bandit chief. Now, seeing him ride so calmly to the rendezvous of the outlaw, and greeted by him so familiarly—well some day, somewhere, he was going to pay!

Bon Villon reined in his horse and looked appraisingly at the Indian.

"No, I am not hunting," he said coldly. "I am on my way back to the Dolette Hills. I have delivered your message to Madame Lisso and, in turn, I am carrying this package to Sabine for her." He indicated the little bundle on the saddle before him.

"And I want to inform you that Colonel Cushing is at Natchitoches in garrison with his troops," continued Bon Villon.

"Damn Cushing! We are too busy to think about his damned American troops!"

Bon Villon's eyes flashed.

"It will pay you to think—every soldier in the

garrison has been ordered to capture you!"

From his perch in the tree Guydo saw the long, inscrutable look Ocase gave the Spaniard. The Indian gave a low whistle and immediately from tree and bush the outlaw gang silently gathered about their chief. Bon Villon started in astonishment at this sudden marshalling of forces.

"Will you join us this morning, Cap?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"We have game in sight and are willing to divide the booty if you'll come with us."

Bon Villon drew himself up haughtily. His face paled and with dark flashing eyes he burst into a flood of vituperation.

"Robber! Murder! Do you think I would join you in any of your dastardly crimes? Too long I have borne with your impudence. Submit to it longer I will not! I . . ."

"But the booty is immense, Cap!" replied Ocase. "A whole pack train of silver from San Antonio will soon pass along here, and we will transfer the treasure to our possession. It will be but child's play for we are many and they are few, unsuspicious . . ."

"Then I shall myself warn them!"

"No, Senor Captain," interrupted Ocase cooly as he motioned for his men who had stirred angrily at Bon Villon's threat, to remain silent. "You will not!"

"But I will," insisted the Spaniard.

"Have you so soon forgotten our little affair in Madrid?" asked the other.

Bon Villon made a hopeless gesture with his hands while his expression slowly changed.

"You will not warn them because I ask you not to do so," said the Indian, bending upon the other a look of the utmost assurance.

The two men faced each other for a moment, then, without a word, Bon Villon wheeled his horse and dashed back up the trail. The outlaws looked at each other questioningly, and one or two made as if to follow the intrepid horseman, but with a word or two, Ocase quieted their fears.

"Lebo, you take your men to the left; Labat, the right. I will go with Cane to that clump of trees. The pack train will soon be here."

Guydo clung to his tree. Below him lay concealed some twenty of the most desperate outlaws in three parishes. Not only was he powerless to escape or to warn the traders, but he himself was in great danger. A wandering eye might spy him aloft in his tree, an unguarded movement might betray his presence, and then he would share the fate planned for the pack train.

In the stillness all the tiny sounds of noonday forest life rang loud in his ears; the rustle of the leaves, the call of the insects, the song of a bird, even the fall of an occasional twig, sounded un-

naturally loud. Presently, mingled faintly with other sounds, Guydo heard the slow tramp of mules and the jingle of harness. Down the trail toward the pool came the pack train, a company of peaceful Spanish traders conveying their goods from San Antonio to New Orleans by way of Natchitoches. A moment more and the unsuspecting men would walk into the trap set for them. The boy's throat suddenly constricted; he could not let the men perish unwarned.

"Espagnol! Espagnol! Guard yourselves. You are trapped!"

Guydo's cry and the shrill whistle of Ocase came simultaneously, and the ruffians rushed out of their hiding shooting into the petrified little cavalcade. A cloud of dust and smoke almost blotted the scene from Guydo's eyes; curses, groans and shrieks rent the air. The terrified mules brayed, wounded horses added their snorts and shrill cries to the uproar. After the first onslaught, the traders, realizing their plight against superior numbers, abandoned their pack animals, and spurring their horses in terror, galloped wildly down the trail, leaving the train in possession of the robbers.

With beating heart Guydo gazed down from his tree. Stretched lifeless beside their mounts or fast dying in pools of their own blood, lay twelve men. To his satisfaction he saw that five of them were members of Ocase's gang. After all, his warn-

ing cry had enabled the attacked traders to inflict some punishment on the robbers. Immediately, the outlaws drug the dead back into the woods and hid them in the undergrowth, after stripping them of such articles as caught their fancy.

The leader of the traders, wounded in the arm, regained consciousness to find himself tied securely to a tree. His face twitched in surprise as Ocase approached him.

"Why, my acquaintance of the morning!" he exclaimed.

"Quite true," answered the Indian insolently. "I enjoyed your drinks and your conversation. You gave me valuable information."

"You, a spy and a Spaniard!"

The half-breed grunted with amusement.

"Spaniard or Indian or American,—whichever pleases my fancy and my interests, Senor Bartelo!"

"So you know even my name?"

"Ough! My agent at San Antonio sees to little things like that. But you are fortunate, senor. I never kill one with whom I have drunk a toast—not even when he has cost me several of my men. No, do not thank me; it is one of my little peculiarities."

"Son of a dog! Breed of Judas, I'd rather die a thousand deaths than owe my life to your hands!"

Ocase shrugged.

"You can't make me kill you, Senor Bartelo, with all your words, I'm going to send you on your way. Here, Lebo, escort this caballero on his way to Natchitoches; free him within sight of the town."

Cursing, the prisoner was thrown across his horse, and accompanied by Lebo, he soon disappeared up the trail toward Natchitoches.

Quickly the bandits gathered up their booty, and led by Ocase, disappeared among the trees. When the last faint sound of their steps had died into silence Guydo, stiff and cold, climbed down from his tree. Weary and hungry, he left the springs and hastened toward home.

Afternoon shadows were lengthening across the trail when he came to the Bayou Scie road. As he walked along, peering cautiously about him lest he be intercepted by one of the robbers, he heard the tramp of horses behind him. Warned by the occurrences of the morning he slipped from the road and, scurrying into the canebrake, hid himself carefully as two horsemen came into view. They rode slowly and scanned the canebrake on each side of the road as they approached.

"Here's a good place," said one of the men. "We'll get him this time 'cause he's bound to pass along pretty soon."

"Sure," agreed the other. "We'll get him this time I 'low."

Turning aside, the men passed within a few paces of the concealed Guydo, and riding deeper into the thicket dismounted, tied their horses and retraced their steps toward the trail. Guydo watched them carefully hide themselves so that their long rifles commanded the road.

"Another ambush," thought the young man. "How much murder must I see in a single day?"

He scrutinized the trail. These men had not been members of Ocase's gang, they must be survivors of the pack train, planning revenge for the death of their comrades.

Soon there was a slow thud-thud of an approaching horse. Guydo's heart almost stopped beating as for the second time that day, he saw Bon Villon come riding toward a death trap. The two men in ambush levelled their weapons and crouched expectantly while the rider came closer. Noiselessly Guydo raised his rifle and aimed at the trigger hand of the man nearest him. A scream of pain followed his shot and the two bandits, startled at the attack from their rear, jumped to their feet and ran through the thicket. In excitement Guydo leaped up and turned to rush after them, but a stern, cool "Halt! Or you are a dead man!" interrupted him.

Startled, the young Spaniard turned and looked down the black muzzle of a huge pistol held by Bon Villon. Half closed eyes hard as steel, re-

garded him. The rifle dropped from the boy's grasp and his hands went up over his head.

"Why did you try to murder me from ambush?" demanded the caballero's hard voice.

"You are mistaken, senor. I did not shoot at you. It was the two men you heard running through the cane."

Bon Villon smiled unbelievingly.

"Must I recall to you the scene at Madame Lisso's?"

Guydo flushed.

"And if you did not shoot at me, why were you hiding?"

"I heard these men planning to kill some one. I did not know it was you until you came in sight."

"How do I know you are not lying?"

"Though I bear you no love, Senor Bon Villon, no Sepulvedor can watch a man shot in the back and remain silent. Nor will he allow a man to call him what you have just called me. Get down off that horse and I'll show you what I think of you!"

The older man still eyed the angry youth uncertainly.

"Some one shot at me. I find you here in the thicket—rifle smoking—poised for flight—"

"Come with me. I think I can prove to you that I speak the truth."

Guydo led the Spaniard to the spot where the two ruffians had hidden. There on the ground lay

a rifle. Guydo stooped, picked up two bloody fingers that lay beside the weapon and held them up for the Spaniard to see.

"You see, senor, they're not mine!"

"*Par Dios!* It must be they!" Guydo heard him mutter under his breath, and to the youth's great surprise he saw a glad look spread over the stern features of this now more than ever mysterious man.

"I owe my life to you, Senor Sepulvedor," he said in an humble tone. I apologize for my unjust suspicion. I am glad of what has happened here today. We—will wait. Please count me your friend whether you are mine or not. My horse is tired and I have a long ride home. I bid you *adios senor.*"

Guydo bowed and the two parted, Bon Villon to pursue his way into the hills and the young lad to continue his weary plodding to the Bayou San Miguel. Just what was the relationship of Bon Villon to the bandit, Ocase, whom he would warn, but not join in deviltry? Bon Villon's saying, "It must be they," was puzzling. But, behind all, remained the unsolved mystery of Bon Villon's part in the abduction and marriage of Sabine.

As Guydo, hours later, walked wearily up the path toward his home he saw his father and mother standing expectantly upon the gallery. Marcelena left her parents and came skipping down the path.

"Hi, Guydo-spido," she began banteringly.

"Where have you been all day—" Her voice faded as she saw the tired, haggard look on her brother's face.

"Why, son, you look all tired out. Anythng wrong?" asked Don Leon.

"Another robbery and murder at Fallen Springs," he answered wearily, surrendering his rifle to his mother.

Dona Amata gave a cry of sympathy.

"Oh, oh, the traders! They passed here this morning. Was it they?" asked Marcelena, her gray eyes flashing with excitement.

"Yes, a friendly bunch of Spaniards robbed and murdered. I saw it all and have had the devil of a time."

He slumped down on a bench while his family gathered around him.

"Ocase, the half-breed as usual," he said, answering the unasked question.

"The cut-throat son of hell!" flamed the don. "Something must be done."

"Sit down, Leon, and let Guydo tell about it," said Dona Amata quietly.

Quickly the boy described his adventure in the woods and the meeting with Ocase at the springs. When he mentioned the name of Captain Bon Villon Marcelena clasped her hands and cried, "Oh, our man of mystery! What did he do?"

Her father frowned at her interruption.

"Your fine gentleman is hand in glove with the Indian. Wait till I finish and you'll see," reproved Guydo.

When the lad told of the robbery and the murders, Don Leon stamped angrily about the gallery.

"Governor Claiborne shall know of this. A damned outrage, a disgrace to Louisiana. Thirty years of Spanish rule to end like this—hell and the devil!"

"I know you must be hungry son, I'll go get you something to eat," said Dona Amata rising.

"Wait, mother. I have more to tell. You would think that the robbery would be enough for one day, but on my way home I came across Captain Bon Villon again!"

"Oh!" breathed Marcelena. Father and mother leaned forward expectantly. Something of the actor's enthusiasm and mimicry came into Guydo as he described the ambush planned for Senor Bon Villon and his part in foiling it. At the climax of his story he reached into the folds of his shirt and threw the two bloody fingers on the floor. The women screamed at sight of the gory trophies.

"Well, bless my soul," cried the old don when he had heard of Bon Villon's apology. "He acted honorably there."

"I'm glad he escaped. And you were very brave,

Guydo, to save him," said his sister, her eyes gleaming.

Guydo frowned.

"He may have acted honorably that time, but if he had any spark of manhood or character he'd kill that half-breed!"

"His connection with Ocase is puzzling," admitted Don Leon. "What can he have in common with that son of Augustus Bowles?"

Leaving his father to his thoughts Guydo followed his mother into the house.

IV.

Twilight had given place to night's shadows. The sky in the region of the west loomed with dark clouds which obscured the sinking moon. The atmosphere was heavy as tho a mist was falling. A lonesome, silence had settled over the dark woods. This change was felt by Ocase Mataha's gang as they rode through the gathering gloom. All was silent except for the sound of wild animals scurrying to shelter at the approach of the horses. The men had been riding hard since leaving the Spanish Trail, and with the sinking of the sun, gloom had descended upon them like a suffocating blanket.

"Dam them varments!" cursed a man named Cane. "They make me nervous."

"You ain't afeered of varments after livin' in these parts as long as YOU have? I swear—an' startin' at every noise." said his companion, Lebo.

"I ain't myself tonight, Lebo. I feel so strange. I'm dreadin' somethin' terrible. I believe I'm marked." said Cane in a subdued, scared voice.

"Marked? Haw, ha-ha! Marked fer what? What you mean?"

Cane touched Lebo on the arm.

"This is the seventeenth of the month!"

"You don't say. Then I'm serious too."

There was an instant of strained silence. Cane spurred up his horse.

"That rifleman—is that what's worrying you, Cane?"

Cane looked searchingly behind him into the black night.

"I believe he's gone crazy," thought Lebo. Aloud he said, "Cheer up, man. What you think of the haul we made today?"

Cane lifted his head with a frightened start.

"I - - - I don't care for it. How can I tell, when I feel I'm at the edge of a abyss, a-lookin' into it. Let's ride fast or I'll die in these dark woods! He's a-stalkin' us now— I feel it. He's no man and it's always on the seventeenth. Last month he got Romero."

One of the men riding in advance said: "It's all because we helped the chief steal the old witch's granddaughter an' she's shore a witch all right. She conjures whenever she wants too, an' she's got the devil a-trackin' us like a deerhoun' until we're afeered to look out from under kiver at night. It's crack—he never shoots but onct—an' one of us is boun' to kick the dust! It's shore witchcraft—an' always happens on the seventeenth."

After they entered the swamp the going was slow.

The soft dirt gave under the horse's feet, and the pack mules were tired. Cane crowded his horse as close as he could get to the giant Lebo. A panther screamed—like a child crying in the dark.

The men looked into the dark woods with paling faces.

Lebo urged his horse to a livelier gait.

"Devil or ghost," he said. "We must ride.'

Quickening their pace they came up with the men driving the pack mules ahead.

"Where has the chief gone?" asked Cane.

"He left hours ago for other parts, telling me to go with you and see to the packs," answered Lebo.

Again Cane expressed his fear in a frightened voice. So unseasy was his tone that Lebo was startled as Cane leaned forward in his saddle and cried out shrilly, "I dreamed last night I was a-going to die."

"Hell, man, dreams don't count. Cheer up, you might have went to bed drunk. We'll send that fellow about his business if he pesters around here."

Cane was quiet with an overwhelming fear. The reality of the past months had suddenly opened before him. The death of his companions one by one, at the hands of the phantom Rifleman on the seventeenth of each month, had worked upon his superstitious mind until it had become a real, tangible ghost. So it was with most of the gang.

They feared nothing so much as this phantom Rifleman.

Through the dark the men drove their pack mules in a silence broken only by the hoofbeats of the animals. Suddenly the sharp report of a rifle echoed on the still night air and struck terror into the hearts of the robbers. Cane swayed to one side, then dropped from his saddle.

Stark terror held the men chained for a moment. Then with fearful cries, leaving the pack mules behind, they tore through the woods. Spurs clattered as the men leaned forward in their saddles to urge their horses on. The fatal seventeenth had again claimed its victim!

After leaving the packs with Lebo, Ocase had gone ahead to join Joe Sohone at the San Miguel trail on the way to Bayou Scie. He had an hour's fast riding before he met Joe.

"Ha, Joe, my Samson! I expected to be here first," he hailed. "Now to Madame Lisso's."

At this announcement Joe turned and gave him a hard look.

"To Madame Lisso's — your Squaw's grandmother?"

"Yes, I intend to interview the old gal."

"It's risky, Cap. I don't like it!"

"Ough—dam it, got to see her. If she can talk to spirits, she can tell us who this rifleman is. I'm losing my men and some are quitting me—I'm

going to make her call this thing off—ough, take a drink."

They stopped and took a long swig, sat a minute —took another.

"Le's study over this affair a little, Cap. I— don't like it. I—'low the less we have to do with the old witch the better off we be. You see—Cap, we stole her granddaughter an' she's laid it up agin' us. Now, I—"

"Afraid, are you?"

Ocase's tone was scornful.

"No, damn it! I'm not afraid of the devil himself! I'll go to see your damned mother-in-law."

The path to the cabin was narrow. Few visited the dark recesses of the place. Silence usually reigned about it save for the bird songs in the day time, and the screech of the owl, the howl of the wolf and the scream of the panther at night. It would have been hard to find a more secluded spot than Madame Lisso's cabin. Tucked into the side of a hill it consisted of two living rooms with a dirt chimney, two doors and one window. The roof was of boards, weighted down by long poles along each course. The land was of dark gray mould from which grew thick underbrush and trees monstrous in size.

In this forest there was a confusing network of young trees and vines, twined over young beech, pine and dog-wood, and the rotten stumps of many

fallen logs. To the east the thicket fell away to the Bayou Scie swamp which was covered by a sea of palmetto and cane, cypress and myrtle bushes. The tall magnolia, its branches filled with smooth leaves and white blossoms stood reigning queen of the forest.

Old Asa had just returned from one of his long tramps on which he had seen and tracked the half-breed's gang. His mind being clearer than usual he gave an account of it to his mother. Madame Lisso at once became excited. She pursed her lips and her eyes sank far back in their sockets.

"Och, whither were they going?"

"Arter gitting back home," replied Asa.

"To Dole, to Dole Hills?"

"Ya," grunted Asa.

"Me God, me God. The devils they are. No good can come of them. Had packs, packs of gold and silver?"

"Aye."

"Oh me! They stole my leetle gal, the same devils. Poor ole critter I be, lef' alone to grieve and worry meself wid ye, Asa, and ye ain't got no sense."

"Aye, mam," grunted Asa.

"Pore ole lonely critter me am. Mout Ocase come dis way?"

"Mout, mam."

"Devils take 'em. He has me chile, me Sabine, me Sabine."

She went to the window and opened the shutter. The night was black and storm clouds were hurrying from the West. She turned and said to old Asa: "Shove in a pine knot and go to bed."

"Aye, mam."

Throwing a pine knot on the fire he crawled into the little shedroom to sleep, while Madame Lisso sat humped in her straight backed chair. The gray wisps of hair fell about her shrunken, wrinkled face that looked even more distorted in the gleam from the pine knot flame. She was thinking of Sabine as she listened to the rain pattering softly on the roof.

"I'm a pore, ole crittur and don't want that Ocase pesterin' round me. The devil take 'im."

Madame Lisso sat thinking and dozing far into the night.

"Hello!" came from without.

She came to with a start and, creeping to the window, peered out.

"Lord, they are come."

"Hello, you old squaw! Get up!"

She drew the shutter.

"Who comes?" she quavered in a shrill voice, and, crossing the room, peeped through a crack in the door. In the vivid lightning she saw two men on horses. She stood breathless, waiting.

"Hello! Damn you, wake up!"

She strained her eyes and spoke in her queer old voice.

"Who be ye?"

"Chief Ocase and one of my friends, Granny."

The ran was pelting, the hurly-burly of the clouds was on. There came a blinding flash of lightning, a great crash of thunder and for a minute the old woman stood as if stunned. All day she had felt sad and strange and now, here was the half-breed chief whom she hated and feared. There was a violent knocking on the door. As Madame Lisso lifted the latch it flew open and the two men stumbled into the room.

"I'm clumsy tonight, mammy, a thousand pardons," said Ocase as he flapped his coat to one side and showed the polished handle of a pistol.

"Ye hadn't orter pester me at night and me a pore ole lone critter and no one to protect me 'cept Asa and his senses gone."

"I'm one of the family, you know!"

"For heaven's sake, ye brat uv er squaw, ye have broke me heart already. Do ye think me forgits?" screeched the old woman.

Their eyes met, hers sinking deep down, his glancing furtively aside. The room was very quiet. There was only the patter of the rain on the roof, the deep thunder and the dropping of coals from the hearth and the flicker of the pine knot fire.

"They call you a witch," began Ocase. "Can you tell me—"

"Shet up," she snapped. "Don't ye call me ole witch. Is thet why ye come here? I'm na witch —jest a pore lone ole critter."

The lightning gave a spasmodically uncertain light as the fire flickered out and the wind lifted Madame Lisso's long gray locks.

"Oh me, oh me, go and leave me, ye sassy devil!"

"My men are being killed on the seventeenth of every month by a secret enemy. Now tell me who does it, old witch," said Ocase, trying to frighten her.

"God knows," replied she.

As she spoke a tongue of lightning flashed along the side of the cabin, struck the mud chimney, and a great ball of fire plunged into the ashes, burying itself in the hearth. Ashes and embers flew about the room. So great was the explosion that Ocase and Joe were hurled to the floor and Madame Lisso flung into the corner. A tomb-like darkness followed the lightning flash, and as the stunned occupants of the cabin recovered their senses, a stench of brimstone assailed their nostrils, bit deep into their lungs and filled their eyes with smarting, acrid tears.

The two men crawled to the door and tumbled out, as the shriveled old woman darted through Asa's room into the back yard.

Revived by the fresh air, Ocase and Joe hurriedly mounted their horses to ride away from the bewitched cabin which housed Madame Lisso and her devil consort, who had nearly suffocated them with brimstone. Joe Sohone even claimed afterwards that he actually saw the devil with horns as he swept by them. Madame Lisso's chicanery was a settled fact in their minds forever. They rode swiftly down the trail made clear by the continuous lightning. A few miles down the bayou they found shelter in a ravine until the storm and rain had passed.

Old Madame Lisso was recovering her breath when the robbers rode away.

"Holy Mither," she said after several deep breaths of cool, fresh air. "The Lord has saved me agin."

Her voice quavered pitifully but, with a revulsion of feeling, she clutched her withered hands and panted wrathfully, "Be gone, ye deal of satan who is good for ye yet."

She re-entered her house which was still stifling with the smell of sulphur. Getting down on her knees she fanned the smouldering fire to a bright blaze and saw the old pot of sulphur that had been struck by the lightning. A smile crossed her face and caused her jaw bone to twist where the sharp chin jerked to one side.

"Me brimstone co't fire, sho' ez ma mither was an

Irish woman, ma father a Frenchman and meself an ole witch."

With that peculiar smile still on her face she went to see if Asa was all right, and found him sound asleep, undisturbed by the storm.

V

The morning after the big storm Senorita Marcelena rode along the winding path that led to the lonely little cabin of Madame Lisso. Playful breezes cooled and perfumed the woods of emerald green. Bees droned in the bright sunlight on flower decked hills, and fish darted in the dark shady bayous. It was a dreamy day in the Southland.

Marcelena rode thoughtfully along, suddenly with her decision to visit the old witch, the joy went out of the morning. Sabine with her bright grateful smile wouldn't be there—she never would be there again—in the old way.

"Oh," she thought. "How I dread this!"

Then she was stricken with shame. Poor, lonely, old Granny Lisso! How much worse this had been for her! How often had she mended their little dresses—doctored their cuts and bruises. That lonely cabin and hills and woods—without Sabine. But, why had Sabine been so weak? Why let them frighten her into doing such a thing! If she had only been a little brave—fought back, or died—YES, a thousand times! But what could anybody

do now? She was married to him, bound by her own vows made in the Holy Catholic Church. Sabine—was a fool!

Her thoughts became more depressing. Dreading the sight of the familiar little cabin where she had spent so many bright hours, she allowed her horse to take his time. Sabine, lovely, elfin, seemed to flit along by her side.

"How I miss her," she thought. Tears filled her eyes and glittered on their dark lashes. "Married to a loathsome Indian, a half-breed! And poor Guydo, roaming the woods, miserable as the day is long. Well, well, what's the matter, old horse? What are you trembling for?"

Her horse had stopped stone still. She could feel him quiver beneath her. Puzzled and wondering, she looked for the cause. A soft rustle in the branches of a tree at the left of the road and she saw it crouched low on a limb, with yellow eyes gleaming. Blackness wipped across her vision. She heard the shrill scream of the animal mingle with a deafening roar that rent the air.

An eternity passed. She opened her eyes. A great yellow panther lay bleeding in the path ahead. She tried to raise her hand to hide the sight from her eyes, but her cold, trembling hands were held in a strong warm clasp. Her gaze widened to behold a pair of dark eyes that looked straight into hers, with the most appealing anxiety. She was

leaning on the broad shoulder of the mysterious Senor Bon Villon. His arm was around her, holding her tenderly. She raised the black lashes from her pale cheeks. Again their glances met and clung. A strange, revealing moment passed in throbbing silence.

Marcelena found herself sitting straight, talking, but of what she scarcely knew. Senor Bon Villon stood back now, his arms folded, and his dark handsome face that for a moment looked into hers with such tenderness again assumed its usual stern expression.

"Oh, what a coward I am! All my life I have imagined how I should act if this should happen—and what did I do? Sat paralyzed."

Bon Villon watched her. He knew she was trying to get control of her awful fright by sheer force of will.

"There was nothing you could have done. Your horse stopped dead in his tracks."

Smiling, he caught the bridle reins and turned her horse's head in the opposite direction, thinking to get her frightened eyes away from the fearful, twitching beast. His dark eyes went searchingly over her face.

"You are still frightened. I am sorry you have had this terrible experience, Senorita. I came into this path at the crossing back there. I saw you riding along slowly and I thought to pass on unno-

ticed when I observed the strange action of your horse. The next few minutes *were* exciting!"

She shivered, but the color was ebbing back to her pale cheeks. She felt she must say something quickly, must let him know that she felt grateful. She turned to him in all her appealing sweetness. Tears rushed to her eyes as she raised them to him.

"Let me thank you—but how can I, ever? God only could have helped me if you had not, Senor Bon Villon."

"No thanks are needed, Senorita Sepulvedor."

He flashed her a glance of mischief at the look of astonishment that leaped into her eyes.

"I see you often as I pass your home on the San Miguel Bayou."

The idea that he had seen her and had all the while known who she was utterly confused Marcelena. She felt somehow incredibly ruffled at his amused look. She sent him a dark, burning look from under her wide brimmed hat. He saw at once that she was not overly pleased with him and hastened to explain.

"Perdoneme, senorita, but hearing that the Sepulvedor family living on the Bayou San Miguel were Spaniards from my own home city of Madrid I naturally became curious and was on the lookout whenever I happened to be passing. Then one day I saw you—"

He left the sentence unfinished, watching her

with serious intentness for a moment. Then he continued as he swept back his black hair to put on the wide Spanish hat he had been holding in his hand: "also our old friend, Madame Lisso, tells me about you. She is very fond of you, senorita."

Catching up her reins, she looked up at him, a smile on her lovely mouth, her hair clinging in smoky ringlets around her impertinent face.

"I was on my way to see dear, lonely old granny. Now I have no heart to go on with my visit. Perhaps some other day I shall have better luck,—but, no, I shall never be luckier than I was today. My everlasting thanks to you, Senor Bon Villon."

Her last words were spoken with deep feeling as she glanced up at the swaying leaves where death had lain in wait for her. She gave a little shuddering sigh as her dark eyes passed to the treacherous beast lying with bared teeth, now stiffening in death. Very slowly she drew her gaze from the scene, every detail of which was burned in her memory for all time to come. She turned to find Senor Bon Villon mounted on his fine black horse, his intention to ride with her quite evident. This brought her back to realities quickly enough. Her thoughts raced madly. What would she do, what could she do? Surely she remembered Guydo's treatment on the Bayou Scie road. Father would be furious to see her come riding home with the friend of the

half-breed. He *had* saved her life this very morning but—her *people at home!*

Bon Villon was quick to notice the change that came over her and the disturbed glances she darted at him as their horses walked side by side. His mind read her thoughts aright and he smiled to himself.

"She is frantic with the fear that I will go all the way. She is thinking desperately. What a sweep of black lashes! Passionate eyes and soft red mouth!"

A flame leaped to his eyes and a choking sweetness suffocated him. The appealing loveliness of her soft form was like strong wine in his veins.

"At last she has made up her mind to speak," he thought as she raised her eyes, but she veiled them again when she saw the softened look he was bending upon her. "I must not worry her longer."

"We shall soon be at my turning off place, senorita," he said. "I shall not fear to leave you in the pines;—they have no low-hanging branches."

As he had expected, her reacton to his words was instantaneous. She turned on him the most adorable, radiant look he had ever seen on a woman's face, and he worshipped her for her inability to conceal her feelings.

Now, relieved and happy, she talked and laughed, and dimpled with satisfaction if she caused a smile to light his serious face.

"My," she kept thinking to herself. "He may be a friend of the Indian; Guydo thinks so, father

thinks so, but for my part, I—well, *exduso decir que* —I think the Indian shows admirable taste in the selection of his friends as well as in the selection of his wife. My brother is very smart usually but this time he is wrong. The handsome senor is not and never was a murderous robber. I'd wager my life he is just what he appears,—a dark-eyed, fascinating *caballero.* There! Guydo Sepulvedor, a snap of my fingers for what you think. I think he is *wonderful,* superb!"

Bon Villon halted a short distance from her home and she thanked him again and again for saving her from the claws of death on this glorious morning. The tall pines whispered overhead as Spanish eyes looked into Spanish eyes, for Spanish blood is warm. He turned before disappearing from sight, and as he lifted his wide sombrero she heard faintly,

"*Buenos dias, senorita.*"

"*Buenos dias, senor.*"

The velvety darkness of that night hid a new light that glowed in the eyes of Senor Bon Villon as he sat and smoked on his little gallery in the Dollette Hills.

VI.

The town of Natchitoches, situated on the banks of the Red River and about four hundred miles north of New Orleans by water, was at this time the most Western town of note in Louisiana. The old fort and barricades stood thirty feet above the banks of the river on soil of stiff, muddy clay.

About the time of the cession of the province to Spain, the settlers moved to the sandy bank of the river for convenience in landing and unloading. Near Natchitoches there were two lakes, one sixty and the other thirty miles in circumference; both almost surrounded by dark, dense swamps. High around the blue green water of these immense lakes, lacy heads of wild rice, willow trees and cat-tails waved in the soft breeze; starry faced pond lilies floated upon the surface in thousands affording a beautiful feasting place for geese, duck, brant, and swarms of lovely swans that came south in winter. In summer the Indians came here with bows and arrows and killed more fish than their ponies could carry. The low grounds around the lakes were rank with luxuriant grass where buffalo, wild cattle and

Indian ponies fed by day. By night other wilder animals slunk out of the swamps to drink from the clear lakes. Here man and beast were equally privileged to roam.

No wilder spot between the Atlantic and Pacific could be found than this Louisiana Valley of the Red River. The lazy alligator was at home in these swampy ponds. The rusty moccasin lay in the sun, ready to glide into the water at the least danger. Turtles of all kinds and sizes sunned themselves on fallen logs and cypress knees. Long Spanish moss hung straight from trees in the still, heavy atmosphere. A fugitive from justice could hide for years in Louisiana's swamps and be as one dead to the outside world.

On this summer morning in Natchitoches, rain was pelting down in sheets. Along the cloudy horizon gleamed a faint, gray light of approaching dawn, while the shrill crowing of Spanish cocks announced the hour to the inhabitants. Lights shone from only a few of the houses. The streets were dark and miry with red mud. Moored on the river were a few pirogues and dug-outs and one large flat boat.

In the gray light and pouring rain the river was only a wide white mist. Through this mist a pirogue, rowed by two Indians, glided swiftly up to the landing. One of them sprang out to make anchorage. He was followed quickly by a small white

man, the lone passenger, who handed the boatman a few coins and without delay began ascending the steep, slippery incline of the river bank, while the Indian boatmen glided noiselessly back down the stream.

The passenger of the pirogue, reaching the top of the bank, walked along the muddy street. He peered through the rain and stopped often to listen as if expecting some one. He kicked at a cur that followed him and swore vilely. At a corner he stopped and waited some time before the splashing of a horse's feet in the mud attracted his attention. He was at once alert, straining to catch the direction of the sound.

Down the street a shadowy form was approaching on horseback, leading another horse by the bridle. The man from the pirogue stepped out where he could be seen by the rider. The newcomer halted and the two men conversed a few moments in whispered Spanish. Then the man from the river mounted the extra horse and they rode out of town at a fast gait in the direction of the Bayou Scie settlement. They travelled the main road and had gone several miles before day broke in clear light and disclosed their faces. The man from the boat who seemed the younger of the two, was dressed in priestly garb. His sallow face was smooth shaven, with heavy lidded, lusterless eyes that were in no wise enhanced by the thin cruel lips of his

singularly womanish and repulsive mouth. Slender and of slightly less than medium height he sat his saddle with an arrogant air. As they rode he addressed, always in Spanish, his companion in a smooth drawling voice. One white, much be-ringed hand rested on his saddle pommel, while his right leg hanging twisted from knee to stirrup, indicated that he was crippled. His companion was altogether different in appearance. He was large and burly and dressed in the style of the early settlers. His manner toward the smaller man seemed servile and a little fearful.

As the day advanced and they rode into the edge of the swamp the priest glanced around uneasily. The dark woods were not particularly inviting after the all-night rain, and as the road gradually descended the trees and vines seemed to this stranger in Louisiana to crowd up closer to the road, imprisoning them in the dark mouth of the hungry swamp.

Again the priest looked with uneasiness through the dark way ahead. When he spoke, his voice was smooth and oily, his words cloaked in the language of the Church. This practice he had not put aside after Roman Catholic Church excommunicated him; nor had his eviction kept him from using his priestly knowledge as a cloak for his crimes. Bellaco, his servant-companion, was fairly well educated but had grown up

under the hypnotic influence of the priest. He had been the cat's-paw in so many and so various dark undertakings that now his soul was not his own. Strange to say, he believed in the priest to such an extent that the crimes he committed for him were not crimes, so long as Father Cingaro, afterwards, gave him remission for the things he did.

"I trust, Bellaco, that you are familiar with this road. I accompany you in spite of warning that this country is unsafe."

"My Lord Se—"

"Hush, fool! Call me father," he said quickly, scowling and looking around.

"Father Cingaro," Bellaco continued humbly. "If I did not know you to be fearless I would think you afraid of the woods. We'll be all right now. The clouds have cleared and the rain is over for awhile."

"I should hope so. I have had a most miserable time in this wet hole they call Louisiana. I like New Orleans; but this—*es* terrible. I shall finish this long delayed job and return with my fair Amanda to beloved Spain."

At the mention of the name Amanda, the priest watched the face of Bellaco closely and was gratified to see the horror that instantly overspread it. Bellaco knew the fair Amanda all too well. Fair she was with the beauty of a poisoned orchid, the grace of a coiling serpent. Her one definite feeling was a fierce passion for this evil-eyed, womanly

priest. She used her great beauty solely for his evil uses and did for him things that he dared not do himself. Her trail was a slimy trail of the poisoner, and Bellaco feared the red smile of her fair face more than a thousand devils. He did not question the priest concerning her whereabouts.

"By the fiends, Bellaco," continued the smooth voice. "You are a shrewd fellow. I must confess your letter was a wonderful surprise to me."

"I am glad I pleased you, father."

"Indeed you pleased me, my good Bellaco. Now, for your faithful service in seeing to the furtherance of my plans, I grant you indulgence and remission for the sins you have committed for yourself, and those you are soon to commit for me. I shall not condemn you to severe punishment as Paul did the Corinthian that his soul might be saved. No long fasts, abstinences and other mortifications of the flesh for you, dear Bellaco, while you follow my commands. Bear forever in mind that such happenings as pertain to me are my secrets, not yours. Always keep your tongue silent or I shall be as relentless to you as to a heretic. Now to the matter in hand."

Here his voice dropped lower and he again scanned the underbrush, and turning in his saddle, looked back as though a silent rider might be skulking, listening, at their very heels. There was a quick

subtle increase of interest in the oily tones as he continued.

"Is it true, as you said in your letter, that Senor Bon Villon is living here in Louisiana and that you, good Bellaco, have tracked him to this very settlement after two long years of searching? Ha! You are a clever sleuth and your letter made my heart leap with joy. I have waited for this since the day the young devil escaped me after he had cut his way through the palace at Madrid. With him that day there was a renegade who helped him to escape. Do you remember? Ah, his face comes to me now, half-Indian it seemed. Have you heard anything of him in America?"

"He was a half-breed Indian as we supposed. He is living only a short way from Senor Bon Villon in the Dolette Hills."

"So—" the soft voice of the priest hissed. "We shall deal violently with him if he interferes—but the chances are he will not. We are to be cautious, *pronto,* all through—before this half-breed shall know we have come. Bon Villon, proud devil, shall have no chance again to cut his way out with a sword."

"He has the arm of a devil," interrupted Bellaco scowling. "I am glad I found him before he found you, father."

"Yes, he was a pupil of Napoleon's Master at Arms, and became so proficient with the sword that

he even rivalled his teacher, who was none other than the renowned and unconquerable Jean Lewis, famed for killing ten fencing masters of an Italian regiment without having been wounded. These duels were fought by covenant of the Emperor himself. So you see," purred on the soft voice, "there must be no *vacilacion* when the chance comes. You speak of him as Senor Bon Villon. Does he not use his whole name?"

"No, father, he uses only the Bon Villon. He lives alone with one negro servant and on account of his association with the Indian, Ocase Mataha, has acquired a bad reputation. Many believe that he is responsible for the unsafeness of these wild roads."

"Ah, good Bellaco, these wild roads will be safe from him soon—soon."

The dull, snaky eyes opened wide for an instant. Venom darted from them in angry anticipation of the strike, and they then became dull and lusterless.

"Many of the settlers think him the brains of a robber gang made up of thieving, murderous Mexicans and Indians. They have grown to be a terror to travellers, and the leaders in Sabine Parish have appealed to the Governor to destroy them."

The priest glanced about uneasily, then chuckled into a purring laugh.

"Our fine caballero a robber! *Es terrible*—."

"But there is no truth to that report father."

"Fool, think you I do not know? But you make my soul sing for joy. This is truly the chance I have awaited so long. I mean to finish him this time and I shall. My reward is near, I feel it. He is the last of his family and when I am rid of him—" He chuckled delightedly. "At his own expense I shall say masses for his soul's comfort. And on you, my faithful son, I shall shower gold and preferment. You shall dip your fingers into his vast fortune also, and with Amanda, *querida,*—but where are you leading me? It is already late in the day and still we ride."

"I am taking you to Jose's cabin. Jose is the man I have hired to help us."

"*Dios!* Bellaco. Keep this fact before you and never forget it. You are the leader and I but accompany you. Be ever careful about saying *us* or you will be begging me to get your soul out of everlasting purgatory. Where does this Jose live?"

"In a swamp thirty miles from here. It will be night when we get there. Jose is a Kentuckian and came to these parts to keep his neck out of a hemp neck-tie."

"Ha! Bellaco, your humor is enlightening."

The look that the priest turned on his unsuspecting servant was contemptuous, and it was very well that Bellaco was unable to read the thoughts behind the pale, womanish face, or Cingaro would have

lost his hypnotized obedient tool to the dark safety of the swamp.

"Father, do you know Senor Antonio Cordero, Governor of the Province of Texas?"

"Yes, I was called in to see him while he was ill in Spain, and administered a dose which relieved him of much suffering. If we need him I could remind him of the incident."

"I was just thinking, father, that if we fail to corner our man we might draw the Spanish authorities to our aid by causing them to think him an intriguer in Spanish affairs. Feeling is hot in this disputed territory and it would be easy to involve him in some way."

Cingaro thought this over a moment.

"I think we will not need Cordero's militia and Indians, my son. They are stationed at the Trinity River, so I heard in New Orleans, and are re-enforced by Don Simon Herra of Monterey and his soldiers. The Louisianians are wide open to an invasion from the Sabine River to New Orleans. Baton Rouge is the only fortified place of any strength and even there what with the dissatisfaction of the settlers, the United States is unprotected. But we had better work alone. It is safest."

As the hours passed Cingaro's soft purring conversation ceased. The unholy light in his eyes became dull and lusterless in the damp heat of the swamp. They rode out into a lovely stretch of for-

est, and for miles the most gorgeous scenery of Sabine Parish unfolded before them. For a while the giant, sweet-scented magnolias shaded their path only to stop abruptly and usher the riders into a stretch of long-leaf pines that murmured knowingly above the two as they rode noiselessly on the soft needles below. The breeze made harps of all the leaves of the woods, but all this natural loveliness was lost on Cingaro and Bellaco as they plunged again into the swamp.

Just as night was closing in Bellaco and the priest rode up the narrow path to Jose's cabin. They found Jose at home in the low hut. With its earthen floor as hard as stone, it was a fit abode for Jose, a tall wiry villain, his Indian squaw, and the baby, wrapped in a blanket with only its black, beady eyes showing.

As they entered the low door Bellaco spoke to Jose in English.

"Glad to find you home, Jose. This gentleman is a priest, Father Cingaro, just arrived from Spain."

Jose looked the priest up and down, and Cingaro gazing into the dark, evil face of the Kentucky criminal thought with satisfaction, "Jose will do."

They sat on low hard stools around a fire which smouldered in the mud fireplace and gave barely enough light to illumine the three men, deep in subdued conversation, and the dirty squaw and baby on the hard dirt floor in a corner. Jose, long

and loose of limb, shot out a big foot and kicked the smouldering fire into a bright blaze which lit up the dingy hovel. Cingaro's snaky eyes slid over the few objects in the room and came back to meet the cold hard stare of Jose. Now in the bright light of the fire, he noticed the injured hand of his *peligroso* host and glanced at Bellaco inquiringly. Jose saw the look and held out his hand, from which the fingers were missing, and the stumps only partially healed. Swearing murderous oaths of revenge Jose told how his fingers had been shot off from ambush as he had waited for Bon Villon to pass his hiding place.

"By the fiends, Bellaco. Is this true? *Diablo! hombre de!* Has he, then, a charmed life?"

The knowledge that once again his intended victim had miraculously escaped, filled Cingaro's black soul with suppressed rage. Half veiled eyes glowed dull green in the sinister face. Bellaco had never explained this mysterious occurrence to his own satisfaction. Consequently he was floundering and vague in trying to acquaint the priest with what really took place. And, though both he and Jose had a very definite idea that the Phantom Rifleman saved the life of Senor Bon Villon that afternoon in the Bayou Scie canebrake, they kept their own counsel. This diabolic power of the air was not to be mentioned, not even in whispers.

Cingaro, tired and sore from his long ride from

Natchitoches, let the subject pass for the night and suggested that they get some rest. Sleeping on the hard ground, however, was not conducive to repose. The foul air of the hut was rent by yells from the Indian baby at intervals through the night, and so before the first light of day shone through the clay daubed walls, they got up, roused Jose and stepped out into the warm darkness of the swamp. Without attempting to eat what the dirty squaw would offer them, they saddled their horses and rode away, accompanied by Jose.

When they came to the trail which led to the Dolette Hills Bellaco halted to point out the direction of Bon Villon's home. While they stood talking they were met by another of Bellaco's hirelings, a red-faced bully who seemed to understand what was to be done. He addressed his conversation to Bellaco, as he had been hired by him at Spanish Town a few days before, and told to be here on this day.

While they made their plans an old woman squatted hidden behind a bush, and listened intently. Her hawk-like eyes were riveted on the four evil faces. As they rode out of sight, Madame Lisso got up very sprightly for an old woman and began to climb the ravine, mumbling all the while to herself.

"Ough! A plague on the devils. I heerd 'em er plannin' uv they dirty work. Ain't airy leetle toe

uv 'em fitten to live on the yearth. Meanin' to harm a good man that's allers bin good to ole granny, allers sa good to pore leetle Sabine. Devils! Wolves! How I hate thet furren, white one. Ouch! ole granny gwine warn you, honey."

Still mumbling, she hobbled on through the woods, with her Indian basket full of roots and herbs in one hand and a witch hazel stick in the other.

Having mapped out their line of conduct the four conspirators separated before reaching Spanish Town. Cingaro and Bellaco continued their way to Smith's Inn, while Jose and his companion rode back toward the swamp. As they rode along Cingaro inquired all about the parish priests. Hearing their names were Father Sedallae and Father Pavie, he warned Bellaco that they must never under any circumstances meet these men. Bellaco wondered why Father Cingaro wished to avoid the other priests, but with simple faith left the question unasked as they rode on to Spanish Town.

VII.

On this late summer morning Sabine stood gazing from the little shuttered window of the cabin in the Dolette Hills. She presented the same emotionless expression she had worn since the first frenzied days of desperate rebellion against the appalling thing that had descended upon her. Trapped like a wild animal, a life-long captive to the savage whims of a crafty-eyed half-breed. This thought went distortedly through her mind, maddening and filling her days with passionate revolt. From a dazed, frightened child she became a horror-stricken, sickened woman and the consciousness of her wretched plight burned deep into her soul. With set, desperate young eyes this exquisite child-woman began a fearful, unreal existence, with the feeling that it was not herself but some other cold, inanimate thing that had possession of her body.

Her wily husband, artful and cunning in this as in all his dealings, wisely left his golden-white wife to herself for a time, trusting that isolation from relatives and friends, and the humiliation of living under the cloud of his name, would cause her to

shun old associates and become reconciled to her life with him. He knew that through her religion his hold on her was secure for life. Had she not stood in frozen silence before a Catholic priest and signified her willingness to share his life? And Sabine, casting a longing, lingering look behind, wondered in bitterness of heart that the aged, kindly, old father had not read in her white face that her seeming consent was only stark frozen terror. But he had not understood and the crime had been committed. Time does not halt when the world stops for us, and the days swept on for Sabine, dark centuries, black aeons to be lived through with always tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

After a black night of storm with only the lonely sounds of the woods and her own bitter thoughts for company, Sabine stood at the window and watched the blood-red sun climb over the trees. It seemed to move straight out from the Bayou Scie near Granny's cabin. She wondered incuriously if this were an omen, only to shrug despondent shoulders at the irony of the thought. Omen? What could an omen, good or bad, mean for her? Life, free, joyous life, for her was over. But eighteen is young, and the tall pines whispered knowingly in the breeze that brought a strange, new sound to her ears.

She turned her head bird-like, listening. Yes, it was he. Quick, through the back door, to the

woods, and she was out like a flash, speeding across the little clearing to hide in the thick undergrowth at the rear of the cabin. Here she waited in rigid silence for the approach of her crafty lord.

He rode in view down the shady little path, swaying drunkenly in his saddle. At every lurch he let forth a whoop that echoed and re-echoed in the hills, and filled the air with the wild, savage sounds. This was the morning after the big storm, when Ocase and Lebo had made their terrifying visit to the old witch. The draggled, drunken look of him as he reeled from his horse and staggered into the cabin was a revolting and sickening sight to the violet-eyed, watching girl. She heard him kick the table over with a crash of broken dishes, every breath a blood curdling war-whoop as he slashed and fell about the room, causing Sabine's pet kitten to scurry to the yard for safety. This kept up for awhile, then gradually subsided.

Sabine, venturing from her hiding place, crept to the little window and looked in at him. He was hunched in a chair with most of his fine buffalo robes flung about the floor. The interior of the cabin looked as though a violent storm had swept it. With a bottle of liquor in one hand and a gleaming knife in the other, he cut the air with vicious slashes, and muttered and swore in broken Spanish and English, with now and then a streak of Chickasaw.

"Ough, whoopee! Have more squaws—many, heap big—hic! Ha, old Chief McGillery was a warrior. He had—hic!—heap squaws. Ough—hic! ——ough, damn it! Old Mack big warrior, led Telapauches to battle, come home, find heap squaws. White squaw spiritless. Have big black squaw—hic! ough!"

With this and a big swig from his bottle he fell to the floor sodden, inert, where Sabine left him to luxuriate in his carrousal.

Feeling that the day must be gotten through somehow, Sabine wandered off into the woods. A remnant of storm clouds from the night before lay scattered about the sky, and through these the sun streamed, casting a vivid light over the young girl as she climbed upon the trunk of a tree uprooted by the night's storm, and seated herself in its branches. Birds darted about, singing deliriously in the green woods, and two round eyed squirrels scampered up and down the trunk of a giant hickory almost within her reach. Sabine's blue eyes, however, were not on the playful squirrels or the gorgeous trillers of the forest. Her thoughts were turned inward, and thoughts thus directed too often turn bitter.

The orioles suddenly became quiet, and the squirrels ceasing their play, hid themselves in hurried retreat. Conscious of the sudden silence, Sabine looked about her, scarlet lips parted in wonder as she sat motionless in shocked surprise. A man,

dressed in a soldier's uniform and leading a horse by the bridle, was coming toward her, admiration gleaming in his eyes. Sabine sprang to her feet reaching the ground just as the man, smiling and debonnaire, a rifle slung from his shoulder and a sword by his side, arrived at her tree.

The newcomer swept his hat from his head, revealing wavy chestnut hair that lay damp against his brow. Never had Sabine encountered such ardent eyes, such masculine beauty.

"I beg your pardon, Mam'selle. I hope I have not frightened you" he said with a strong French accent. "If Mam'selle will kindly direct me on my way I shall feel greatly indebted to her."

To her annoyance Sabine felt her heart begin to beat with unwonted quickness. To avoid the man's warm glances she veiled her eyes.

"Where does monsieur wish to go?"

"I am in the Dolette Hills in search of a desperate character, a half-breed Indian, who is terrorizing the trails with his gang of murderers. Might it be just possible that Mam'selle has heard of this robber, this Ocase Mataha?"

Sabine felt herself pale. Though she knew him to be what the soldier called him Ocase, was nevertheless her husband and she could not betray him. And there he was in the cabin, blind drunk and helpless—For a moment panic threatened to overwhelm her, but the thought that the stranger could

not know to whom he was talking strengthened her voice as she asked, "Ocase Mataha? And do you mean to capture him, monsieur?"

"*Mais oui, Mam'selle,* of course!"

"But, monsieur, this Ocase is extremely dangerous and would never submit to capture. I beg that you leave him alone."

Her earnestness and suddenly clasped hands did not escape the keen eyes of the soldier. Man-like, he attributed her concern to anxiety for his safety, and pleased, stepped closer, his eyes more ardent than ever. Busy with thoughts to outwit him and prevent the capture of her husband in his drunken helplessness, Sabine forgot her silent admiration of a moment before. Playing for time to marshall her scattered wits she bent her violet-blue eyes full upon the face of the man before her and asked archly, "How long has monsieur been a resident of this country? His accent tells me he is not a native American."

"I am a native Louisianian, Mam'selle, a Creole. My home is in New Orleans though I have lived in Paris with my mother's people," he replied with a charming smile which showed, even white teeth.

Through half-closed eyes he watched Sabine intently, for, beneath the gay, jaunty air of the Frenchman there had arisen an overwhelming curiosity and wonder as he observed the golden head turned in a half listening attitude. Her fair face

seemed carved from cameo so perfect were its lines. A faint color came into her cheeks and gave them the delicate beauty of an azalea.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he thought. "How lovely."

Her voice in his ears, low and hesitating, was like silver bells. She puzzled him by her rare contradictions; summer and winter, blue violets under ice, sunlight on a winter day, all these she seemed. She was not looking at him, but appeared to be listening intently as she spoke.

"Is it desire for adventure that sends monsieur on this man-hunt today?"

At the question the soldier cast aside the gay gentleman attitude and became serious.

"I am Sergeant Karet Broussard, Mam'selle, under the command of Colonel Cushing now garrisoned at Natchitoches. It is by his order that I am on this man-hunt, as you call it. I was not hoping for the good fortune of capturing the Indian today, I but thought to locate him. His arrest will follow quickly as Colonel Cushing has ordered all the garrison to capture him before he has time to commit another outrage. *Mon Dieu!* No longer than yesterday this blood-thirsty villian and his wolf pack slaughtered a pack train. This country has been long suffering from such things and it will go hard with this Indian when we get him."

His words fell upon Sabine like the bite of whip

lashes upon her face. She tried desperately to hide her humiliation as this clear-eyed stranger painted the revolting picture of this man whom she had married, and whom she at this very moment was protecting from the law. Her heart grew cold at the thought that she had become a partner to all that Ocase Mataha did. She felt herself a red-handed accomplice, and her slim childish figure shrank under the self-accusation. Her golden lashes fluttered over shamed desperate eyes.

Sergeant Karet wondered at the lovely, frozen look of her. A strange protective feeling made him long to thaw that expression from her face and kindle a light in the deep blue of her tragic eyes.

But Sabine was remembering that Ocase might any moment betray himself by a drunken whoop from the cabin just out of sight in the woods. She must send this officer on his way at once, for altho she loathed and hated the half-breed, she could not be the one to tie the rope about his neck. Looking up quickly she found the handsome Frenchman regarding her with such frank, interested kindness that her cold little heart contracted strangely, and the straps which bound her load of care loosened for a moment to leave the most delightful sense of freedom.

She was surprised at her own voice saying indifferently, "Now, that you have mentioned your name, sergeant, I remember that I have heard you

spoken of, and always as the *wild* and *daring* Karet. But with all respect for your daring, I advise you to leave this man for another time. It would be extremely foolhardy, to say the least, to try to capture Ocase Mataha alone."

Brussard drew himself up proudly.

"I am not frightened at your warning, Mam'selle, but as you already know me, will you not please tell me who you are?"

His expressive brown eyes had a pleading look that caused another contraction of her heart. She stole a quick glance at the graceful lines of his trim figure and handsome head as he leaned nonchalantly against the fallen tree. In an instant her old mocking self flashed out in her answer.

"Let the mystery remain unsolved for the present, monsieur, since I am doomed to exposure in the near future. And as you refuse to be warned I shall point out the way for your destruction. Follow the path back the way you came and turn to the right at the Spanish Trail. But I shall not wish you luck, Monsieur Karet Brussard, and for today, *Bon soir, Monsieur!*"

She inclined her head slightly, and turning, walked away into the woods in a direction opposite to that of the cabin where Ocase lay in a drunken stupor. With consternation the soldier realized she was taking flight without giving him the slightest

clue to her identity. Impetuously he rushed after her.

"Your pardon, Mam'selle, but pray do not leave me without—"

Sabine turned and flashed him a look that brought him sharply to the realization that this was no ordinary country maiden to be idly played with, but a woman of birth and breeding. Her glance seemed to put the high born Creole miles beneath her tiny moccasined feet. Her words stung him by their unexpectedness.

"You are wasting your colonel's time, Monsieur. Permit me to pass, my husband is waiting for me!"

She stepped by him and walked proudly out of sight without a backward glance, leaving behind her a sophisticated young sergeant more disappointed and chagrined than he was willing to admit.

"Husband! *Mon Dieu!* Such beauty—all gold and white and blue, in these lonely woods. I should pinch myself to see if this is a dream. But, *sapristi!* A husband! I shall find out more about that, my alluring lady."

Gathering up his reins, he mounted his horse and rode off down the path which Sabine had pointed out.

As she wandered in the woods Sabine smiled to herself over the evident discomfiture of the sergeant. How non-plused he had been at her check to his advances, and yet—Something in his merry

eyes and caressing voice stirred her strongly. He would be indignant when he learned his day's ride was for nothing.

Ocase would still be in his drunken stupor—anyway she did not care to return to the cabin. As she walked through the dim aisles of the forest gathering and eating berries, her mind dwelt upon her meeting with the sergeant; the way he had looked at her out of half-closed eyes, the quick way he smiled, his impertinence,—yes, he was so very sure of himself, but different from all the men she had known—very like Senor Bon Villon in style and manner, but much more fascinating.

She stopped suddenly at the thought of Bon Villon. Here before her was the little path, dim but certain, which led to the Spaniard's cabin. Why not pay him a call? She would—it was still early, and Ocase would never know she was away, and if he did—what matter?

As there was no hurry she took her time and again gave herself over to thoughts of the morning. Ocase—worse than she had ever seen him—and the soldier who had come to capture him. Her white fingers and mouth were purple with berries before she came to the little clearing about Bon Villon's home.

The Spaniard was seated on his shaded gallery reading *La Moniteur de la Louisianne*. He heard her steps, glanced up and threw aside his paper, going down the path to meet her. He had heard

of the half-breed's latest outrage on the day before and had planned to see about his little neighbor this morning. Then suddenly she was before him, looking like a runaway child with hat swinging down her back and face stained with berries.

"*Buenos dias, Senora Sabine.*" Gallantly he assisted her up the steps and to a chair. "I was lonesome with no one to talk to but Mulatto. You are God's gift to the lonely, *la nina.*"

At the sound of his name, like Jack-in-the-box, the negro popped his wooly head out of the door.

"Howdy, Miss Sabine," he said grinning.

"How are you, Mulatto," she asked smilingly.

"Jes' sorter tolerable, Miss Sabine. I'se had er mis'ry in muh jints er week dis comin' Chuesday. Den on top er dat I tuk en got wet to de skin las' night fo' I cud git dat bahn do' shut, an dat make dis mis'ry considerable worser. Outside er dat I'se tolerable, thanky, Miss Sabine."

"I'm sorry about your rheumatism, Mulatto."

"Yassum hit makes me feel puny-like sho' does."

"Go, see to my horse now, Mulatto. Let me know how his leg looks today."

"Yassuh yassuh, sho'."

Bon Villon turned to Sabine, looking at her speculatively. He had learned to read her expression in the time he had known her, and could tell when she was more disheartened than usual, or when, having put aside her burden for the time she seemed

her radiant happy self. Today, however, he was puzzled. There was a subtle look of thrilled excitement about her, an air foreign to her usual mood. He hesitated slightly before he spoke to her.

"Everything as usual with you?"

She meditated a moment before answering.

"Yes, only a little more so, perhaps."

Her eyes as she glanced up at him held a subtle humor in their blue depths which suddenly made him think, "My little friend is growing up."

"You are coming out all right, *Chicato,*" he said aloud. "I have read it in the stars for you. Happiness will yet be yours. Ocase is not a God to settle the destiny of your life. A way out will be found. I had it out with him awhile back at Fallen Springs but my hands are tied by a great obligation to him. He reminded me that he had befriended me once at my greatest need, and rendered me helpless to do anything positive."

"Why has he always befriended you, senor? There must be a reason for it. Why does Ocase have this kindly feeling for you that he holds for no other man who is honorable and respectable?"

Surprised, Sabine saw the blood rush to his face. She had not guessed the question would be embarrassing and could not know how obnoxious the thought of his obligation to the outlaw had become to him. Nor did she know that her friend, Guydo, had been the first to open Bon Villon's eyes to the

way in which he was regarded by the settlers. Perhaps she would have gained a better insight into his feelings had she known of his subsequent meeting with another of the Sepulvedor family, a meeting which had filled his thoughts constantly and thrown a film of enchantment over the familiar old woods of the San Miguel. Sabine did not know her host had awakened to the opinions of the settlers only after he had looked into two ravishing gray eyes and felt a gleaming black head pressed on his shoulder the day he had rescued Marcelena from the panther.

Bon Villon shook his head and settled back in his chair with a sigh.

"I have puzzled over this often and long myself, *doncellita,* and it is as much a mystery to me as it is to you. Ocase Mataha is a law unto himself and there is a deep undercurrent to all his motives. His friendship for me has a meaning and a plan which I cannot fathom but I resent the position in which I am placed as the friend and confederate of such a man. Where is he now?"

"He is at home, senor, celebrating his last exploit. He always celebrates, you know."

"*Es terrible.* I tried to locate and talk to him again yesterday but I missed him. Did he tell you anything about it, Sabine,—the robbery?"

"Oh, no, senor, I was gone when he reached home.

He was even worse than usual and I heard him in time to fly to the woods and—"

She paused, wishing to tell him of her meeting with the handsome Frenchman, but hesitating as the meeting now seemed to her a treasured secret. She felt constrained to speak for Ocase was in immediate danger and she hoped the senor could influence him to seek safety in permanent flight. Her reflective mood did not escape the keen eye of the senor and he looked past her smiling.

"What's on your mind You are keeping secrets from me, I believe."

"Well, I have been through a very trying time this morning, senor, while hiding in the woods. I must have been dreaming or half asleep for, before I was aware of the slightest sound, I glanced up to find a man standing only a few yards away holding his horse by the bridle. He seemed as astonished to find me as I was to see him. It was Sergeant Karet Brussard of Spanish Town. He informed me that he was looking for Chief Ocase whom he intended to capture and haul to justice."

Bon Villon jumped to his feet.

"Sergeant Karet was that close to the house and Ocase there drunk!"

"Yes, senor, but I told the sergeant the way to find his man and it was in the general direction of New Orleans."

A mischievous smile crinkled the corners of her eyes at the recollection.

"I hope he reaches there safely!"

Bon Villon walked up and down the gallery in trepidation. Ocase was not all bad. He'd hate to see him hung.

"If Ocase has that dare-devil Karet on his trail he had better skip. At Spanish Town they say that Karet has no conception of fear, that he would as soon go after a man alone as with a regiment at his back. I must see Ocase and try to get him out of Louisiana for a while."

"I came to you," said Sabine, "to ask what I had better do."

"Ocase must go away. It will be good for all of us to have him out of Louisiana and then you might go back and live with your gran'mere—but he will never give you up, I'm afraid. Why don't you leave him? I will help you get to a place he could never find."

For an instant she hesitated. The thought of freedom at any price was sweet but she shook her golden head.

"I promised before a holy father to live with Ocase until death. I could not give up my religion and hope of heaven even to be free in this world. I shall keep my promise, senor."

Looking into her resolute eyes Bon Villon knew

she would do as she said. He was mystified at the ways of women.

Sabine rose from her chair.

"Won't you come with me to see Ocase and warn him of his danger?"

Bon Villon motioned her back to her seat.

"*Sientase, amiga,* Mulatto serves coffee soon and then I will walk home with you. This state of affairs cannot go on indefinitely and I shall tell Ocase so."

After Mulatto had served coffee, Bon Villon and Sabine walked back through the woods to her home. When they entered the cabin they found the Indian still sodden and senseless on the floor. The Spaniard examined him closely.

"He will sleep like this for many hours yet. It will be morning before his brain will be clear enough to understand the seriousness of his position."

"But the soldiers may return tomorrow!" objected Sabine.

"Hardly" replied Bon Villon. "You might tell him what you have learned about the soldiers when he sobers. I must go on to Spanish Town tonight. While there I'll see what I can learn of the plans of the military."

With a few words of farewell the Spaniard reluctantly took his departure, leaving the wistful-eyed child-woman to battle alone with fate, the odds against her.

VIII.

The next morning, when she awakened, Sabine found Ocase Mataha seated in the doorway of the cabin cooling his swoolen, swarthy face in the early morning breeze. Ignoring his presence she went about preparing breakfast. When the coffee was made she carried him a thick black cup of it, then continued her work, seemingly unconscious of his glum silence or the occasional glances he sent her. Beneath her calm she was nervously wondering how much longer he would enjoy the game of cat and mouse played with her since she had been brought to his cabin.

Could she have read his thoughts her mind would have been greatly relieved for Ocase was not thinking of her this morning. He was concerned only with the fate of a rich pack train, captured on the seventeenth, which he had permitted his gang to dispose of—a greater degree of trust than was ever before reposed in them, for the Indian knew the treacherousness of each of his followers, and would not be at rest until the treasure was safely deposited with the remainder of his stolen wealth in his own

secret hiding place. The uncanny seventeenth which for months past had claimed the death of one of his gang by an unknown rifleman, filled him with dark superstitious thoughts causing a chill to tremble down his spine. Even here where the bright morning sun flooded yard and cabin, he looked stiffly about as though the very air and woods were in league with this enemy. His thoughts dwelt anxiously on the fact that this steady murdering of man after man was demoralizing his gang and, if continued, would break up his organization.

Swearing a vile oath, he rose stiffly and stepped into the yard. At the well he drew a bucket of water, and disdaining the gourd, tilted the bucket and drank from it, the wasting water splashing on the ground and his moccasined feet.

After satisfying his thirst the Indian came back to the cabin door. Taking down a huge horn which hung from a nail in the side of the house, walked to the railed-in horse lot and blew a blast which echoed for miles in the Dolette Hills. Then he leaned against the fence and waited. Soon the sound of baying dogs came to his ears and he knew that his henchman, Joe, whose hut was only a few miles away among the hills, was on the way over. In a short time he rode into the clearing upon a sorrel pony, a handsome little animal with red mane and tail. He was followed by a pack of bloodhounds, the property of Ocase as was also the horse. Joe's

great height and size dwarfed the little pony and made both man and beast appear ridiculous, as Joe's huge feet almost touched the ground. At the lot gate he stepped from his horse and lifted the wire fastening, the lean hounds slipping over the high rail fence to fawn at the feet of Ocase. The Indian paid no attention to the dogs but eyed the giant Joe as he turned the little horse into the lot and closed the gate, while the tail of his coonskin cap was swinging with every movement. Joe's bulging muscles showed the strength of a bull, and the hard expression of his face denoted his utter lack of conscience.

Ocase's only recognition of his favorite was a grunt which might mean anything, but Joe seemed to understand. He was full of news and began talking in a lowered voice. He told Ocase where they had concealed the packs from yesterday's robbery.

"Heard anything from Cushing and his soldiers?"

"No, chief. Ain't nothin' in the wind. They ain't made a move as I've heered of. Lebo, he 'lows as how they are layin' low so as to ketch us out of the woods but I done clean forgot Colonel Cushing and his little soger-boys this mawnin', got some real news for you."

Ocase turned a cold eye of inquiry on the giant.

"The news is let loose that there's goin' to be a

hoss race at Spanish Lake at one o'clock this evenin'!"

The Indian's eyes brightened a little and he listened closely as Joe continued.

"Yep! Cooney Chama has spread the news that he is trainin' Bill Robeline's roan hoss and some of the boys think he can't be beat. He's goin' to run agin' Jean Sevalya's hoss and Jean has got backers with money and there's shore to be a crowd, so I figger we can take Antoine and beat hell out of either of 'em as the race's open to airy other hoss that will run agin' those two."

Ocase's beady eyes gleamed. He loved a horse race and had a score of long standing to settle with Cooney Chama, who had outwitted and made a laughing stock of him in a poker game at Smith's Tavern. The Indian had waited patiently for a chance to make Cooney suffer for it.

Joe looked in the direction of the little sorrel, Antoine.

"O'course hits a little risky for us to mix in a crowd. I got wind there's a posse of Sabine Parish led by Magee out looking for us, but I 'low we can fix up to fool 'em, as usual, eh, chief?"

"Magee won't bother me," said Ocase knowingly. "He's trying to get as many men as he can into what he calls the 'North Republicans.' He is egged on by Bernado Gutirro, that dark stranger you see going around with him. Guitirro is a Republican

leader and has been serving under Hidalgo. Since the fall of Hidalgo he has been skulking in the Parish of Sabine. Magee wants to get enough men together to capture Texas from the Spaniards and is anxious to have me join him. He won't trouble us."

Joe looked at him admiringly.

"Hits a wildcat business. Figurin' to jine 'em, chief?"

"Ough, no! Fight my own battles."

"I didn't 'low you aimed to, but you peers to know a heap 'bout Magee and his projecks. You can shore do a pow'ful lot of scoopin' round not to seem you is, but I 'low you know what to jine and how to take keer of your skin dam' all right."

This tribute pleased Ocase but his stoical expression registered no change.

After a little more talk, the two completed their plans and were speeding out of the Dolette Hills toward Spanish Lake. It was a long ride, consequently they made fast time in the morning in order to give the little horse, Antoine, a breathing spell before the race.

Pony races, like all settlement sports, were usually gotten up on short notice, but they never failed to attract a large and colorful crowd. Spanish, French and Mexicans of all classes, each dressed according to his station,—the *caballero* in *sombrero* and *da vestir,* the low Mexican with a red handkerchief about his head, a smattering of Louisiana planters

with their grinning good natured niggers and many blanketed Indians, made a gathering which could not have been found outside of New Orleans. To-day there was an unusually large crowd. The summer sun was pouring down regular dog-day heat. There were four judges, two at each end of the track.

Joe Sohone was not known to be one of Ocase's robber gang, therefore he circulated about freely without fear of detection. Ocase sat apart from the crowd under a tree and played poker. A large soft hat was pulled low over his eyes and a fake moustache covered his thin, cruel lips.

As previously planned Joe made his way to where Cooney Chama was standing boosting his pony's good points, and betting freely with all who came. He was a small wiry Frenchman with one eye, the absence of whose mate he sought to conceal by a black band worn around his head under his hat. He was one of the shrewdest traders and betting men in the settlement, and excelled at the game of poker. He was, therefore, usually well supplied with change. Joe had a few words with him, said he would like to look the roan over before betting. He strolled over to Jean Sevalya's horse, and began to examine his fine points, picking up first one foot and then another as he pretended to study the animal.

"La, Jean!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Somebody's been tampering with your hoss!"

At this, Jean rushed up as Joe slipped a small knife up his sleeve. Joe pointed to the horse's foot, looking straight at Jean.

"Hits a shame! I noticed him jump and flinch as soon as I touched this foot and it looks like hits been done a good while. I'd shore whip the cuss what done it, damned if I wouldn't, Jean."

Jean looked around, scowling and swearing, a villainous look on his sallow face.

"Hell! I wish I could find who done this. I'd pull his damn eyes out!"

"It quickly flew around the track that one of the horses had been jockeyed and the crowd at once rose up, angry and excited. They had come to see a pony race, and wanted to see one. Big Joe whispered to Jean that he could have his little sorrel to race and that he would bet a hundred dollars, and swore that Cooney's horse would never touch the little sorrel's heels. But Jean was furious and swore he would do nothing but look for the damn rascal that jockeyed his horse. Joe led Antoine out on the track and waved his cap and shouted to get the attention of the angry, milling crowd.

"If Jean Sevalya's hoss is out of the race I will bet this little hoss can beat Cooney Chama's, or anybody else's hoss that pleases to run agin' him."

"I take you up on that!" yelled Cooney.

The crowd whooped and the betting began anew. Joe beckoned to Ocase who came forward from under the tree and mounted his pony. With Cooney on his horse the race was on.

As the two ponies started Bon Villon, standing in the crowd, gave a surprised start. His quick eye pierced the disguise of Ocase. At the track was Sergeant Karet and a detachment of soldiers, and he knew if they suspected the racer, the Indian would be hard put to escape. Apprehensively the Spaniard glanced over to where the sergeant and his men were watching the race.

These pony races were always exciting. The mettlesome little animals knew what was expected of them and were off from the start. Bon Villon, despite his anxiety about the half-breed, cheered as the two ponies, neck and neck, reached the far side of the track, their hoofs beating a feverish tattoo. Around the track they sped with cries of encouragement from the onlookers. The little pony gradually eased ahead while Cooney's horse slipped back until, with lightning strides, the sorrel took the lead and began to draw farther and farther away from his pursuer.

Suddenly the crowd gave a groan.

"*Dios!*" exclaimed Bon Villon as Ocase suddenly lurched in the saddle and fell. There was a breathless silence, followed by a Chickasaw war-whoop as Ocase, clutching the horse's mane, flung himself

back upon his mount and, clinging flat on the pony's back, crossed the mark with a thunder of hoofs.

The spectators cheered the victor lustily. They had witnessed a race to their liking and were sportsmen enough to appreciate the wonderful skill and horsemanship of the sorrel's rider. All the applause went to Ocase, while little one-eyed Cooney rode in unnoticed to see big Joe Sohone gathering in the winning stakes.

In the excitement of the race the false moustache had become disarranged in such a way as plainly to reveal its falsity. The Indian had lost his hat in his fall and had not recovered it. One or two men near Bon Villon began to whisper conjectures as to the identity of the horse and its rider. Near at hand the Spaniard saw that Karet and his men were in earnest conversation with a settler who kept pointing excitedly toward the Indian. Alarmed, Bon Villon began to push his way through the the crowd toward Ocase. The press, however, was so great that his progress was slow. In desperation he gave the best imitation of the Chickasaw war-whoop that he could. The half-breed looked toward him and catching his eye Bon Villon signalled that there was danger. The Indian got the warning and, looking toward Cooney who was approaching him angrily, he whispered to Joe.

"There comes that fool, Cooney. Let's ride!"

Leaping to their horses Joe and Ocase shook their reins just as Cooney seized Antoine by the bridle.

"You needn't be in sech a almighty hurry!" he cried. "Wait a minute. I 'low you've cheated me on this here race."

From the corner of his eye the Indian saw Karet and his soldiers edging toward him through the mob. Bending down until his mouth was close to Cooney's ear he hissed, "Turn loose my bridle!"

"I won't, you damn cheat! I know who you are, you dirty Indian!"

"Hold on, Cooney, hold on!" yelled one of the soldiers.

The half-breed spoke to his horse. The animal plunged forward, dragging Cooney along but the game little Frenchman clung tighter.

"Up with him, Joe! Quick!" yelled Ocase to his accomplice.

The giant reached down and lifted the squealing Cooney right into the lap of the half-breed. At command the two horses dashed off, followed by the yells of the crowd and the shots of Karet's soldiers.

"It's the Indian," called the sergeant. "Shoot him, kill him!"

Every one rushed for his horse.

As he galloped along, the Indian felt his rage against Cooney cooling. Each squirm and squeal from the little man soothed his revengeful nature

more and more, but he realized he must get rid of him as the soldiers were now joining the pursuit and the already tired pony was staggering under the double load.

"Ough, you eel! I'd like to choke you but I haven't time now. You turned a trick on me at Spanish Town—I have repaid it. Go, and deal your cards better next time you play with the Indian."

Slowing his pony at a briar patch, the Indian dumped the yelling Cooney among the thorns and dashed on. Soon they reached Spanish Lake and plunging into it, swam their mounts across and disappeared in the wilderness beyond, just as Sergeant Karet and his soldiers rode up to the water's edge. The officer knew it would be useless to try to follow the pair through the swamp, so disappointed and angry, turned back, swearing to get the bandits, and to get them soon.

Heading their horses in the direction of Spanish Town Ocase and Joe, riding more slowly now, picked their way to the outskirts of the town where they were joined by Lebo and Lebat.

IX.

Later in the day after the race at Spanish Lake, Bon Villon rode thoughtfully homeward. He had come as far as the Bayou San Miguel and stopped to get a cool drink from the shady pool. Desire and dread were pulling him two ways and he sat down in the green shade to think.

He wanted to call on the Senorita Marcelena. He had passed and re-passed the little log house among the trees, but if the lovely Spanish maid saw him, she gave not the slightest sign. The weeks had dragged along without a glimpse of her and his hot Spanish blood did not relish waiting. He had resolved to go to her home many times only to pass on down the trail when the log house loomed before him.

Bon Villon was very doubtful of a welcome in the home of the old don, for Guydo had been quite emphatic in his assertions in the canebrake on Bayou Scie, and if the father was equally as positive he needed no further assurance of a cold reception. Thus it had been with him, and still

was, as he sat by the shady bayou within a stone's throw of her home.

All around the woods were green, and dense vines were heavy with clusters of purple grapes over which the birds squabbled, casting occasional glances at the dark eyed stranger trespassing below. The banks of the little bayou were covered with heavy ferns; tall beeches towered overhead and waved their gaunt limbs in the breeze. Bon Villon inhaled the mixed fragrance of damp earth, the faint aroma of laurel, and the musky sweetness of magnolia berries scattered about in their burry husks. The gay little bayou sang low, softly blending its silvery music with the notes of bees and birds.

Bon Villon sat in deep thought, his gaze upon the cabin across the bayou. So absorbed was he that he failed to hear the light footsteps of a little half naked Indian who had glided noiselessly out of the woods and stood still, gazing wonderingly at the tall figure beneath the iron-wood tree. Feeling the curious gaze Bon Villon glanced up and started at being thus spied upon. His movement, in turn, surprised the little Yattessee. Amused, the Spaniard flashed a smile of gleaming white teeth at the young boy.

"*Que susto me elevado,* you little devil?" he said, and leaning forward, he made a shocking face.

Instead of scurrying away frightened into the

woods the little Indian bristled like a brave on the war-path. The caballero threw back his head with a roar of laughter at the ludicrous appearance of the infuriated little figure.

"Why, you—"

His mirth quickly subsided into surprised silence for, unobserved until now, back of the little Yattessee stood Senorita Marcelena, her peculiar gray eyes regarding him strangely from under the broad brim of her hat.

Bon Villon was on his feet in an instant, bowing before her with a shamed look that she of all people had caught him playing the fool.

"*Buenos tardes, Senorita Marcelena.* I am delighted to see you today."

To be in her presence and speaking to her after weeks of eager longing for such a miracle, made his heart throb and his mind bewildered. Embarrassed at having seemed to spy upon him she swiftly lowered her eyes and a *couleur de rose* swept up from her throat and dyed her face even to the roots of her hair. With the sudden impulse of a child she held out her hand and the next instant they were smiling at each other.

What must you think of me, Senior Bon Villon, to creep upon you in this manner?" she asked in her low husky voice. "I did not see you

until too late and then I became interested in your scene with Little Frog. You make splendid faces, senor."

She was enjoying his embarrassment and the peculiar lights in the depths of her eyes went into hiding behind black fringed lashes.

"Please—I have said that I am delighted and that the surprise of seeing you is ecstacy, have I not? At least, I have said it to myself many times since you appeared. I can scarcely believe my eyes even yet; I fear the San Miguel has played me a trick and enchanted my senses. This is an ideal spot in which to rest awhile."

He was making a place for her to sit when she pointed to the fishing rods in the little Indian's hands.

"I have promised to fish down the bayou with Little Frog this afternon and the Indians do not tolerate broken promises."

Little Frog was watching her profoundly, his round, beady eyes snapping whenever they turned to Bon Villon. The caballero calculated quickly; he must make his peace with the Yattessee if he was to get possession of Senorita Marcelena's fishing rod and destroy the proposed outing. The Spaniard reached a hand into his pocket and brought forth a small gold knife. Bending to bring his face on a

level with the small face of his enemy he spoke a few words in Yattessee.

"Heap big Indian knife, me keep canes, you keep knife," he said, flashing the gleaming object before the dark eyes.

Little Frog looked from the shining blades to Senorita Marcelena. She understood the motive behind the trade and was flattered at the tribute, yet dared not encourage Little Frog to accept the bribe. Guydo and her father were in the log house across the bayou, so near she could glimpse it through the trees, and their attitude when she had told them of the incident of the panther flashed into her mind. When she had stressed Senor Bon Villon's part in saving her life, Guydo had dryly remarked that any savage would have done as much, and the don was silent, through his wish not to hurt his idolized *hija,* but his kind, fiery old eyes agreed with Guydo. So with strange misgivings she watched as Little Frog surrendered the fishing rods ot the tall caballero and received the knife. Nor were her misgivings eased when Bon Villon secured his sombrero from beneath the ironwood tree and she found herself walking by his side down the shady banks of the San Miguel.

She looked resolutely ahead, her uncertainty manifested by her increased color and hesitant air. Bon Villon read the uneasiness in her eyes but talked on as if unconscious of any constraint in her man-

ner. He wished to tear asunder this veil of mystery and suspicion the settlement had woven about him and to stand forth in his own true light.

"This is a fine big hole of water and looks deep enough to shelter a whale. Shall we try it here, *senorita?*"

"Ask Little Frog, senor. I always abide by what he thinks when it comes to fishing."

They turned to question the little Yattessee, but to Bon Villon's amused surprise the tiny savage had vanished.

"Your Indian is hiding under some bush close around, senorita, probably to see if his knife will cut," said the Spaniard smiling at the desertion of their guardian.

This slightly relieved Marcelena's feelings as she had been quick to imagine he was already at her home telling the family where she was. She frowned and shook her head impatiently at the thought of being afraid of Guydo. This strange feeling was new to her.

"What can they do to me? They can't kill me," she thought rebelliously.

She seated herself on the green bank determinedly, a come-what-will expression on her face. Bon Villon sprawled at her feet, the fishing rods and tackle lying forgotten where he had flung them. Marcelena's little feet, gay in beaded moccasins, peeped from beneath the white dress she wore. She

removed her wide hat to fan, as the air on the bayou had become breathless and close.

Bon Villon turned on her eyes full of wonder that one could be so entrancingly lovely. The black, gleaming hair told of Spain and old Madrid, the creamy complexion of France, but when she turned on him her black lashed, *chetoyant* eyes, he thought of sapphire flames under cold gray water and knew they were God-given and the world held no more of their kind. Marcelena caught the fire of his glances and her topsy-turvy world righted itself. She knew now that Guydo's wrath and suspicions, and her father's silence had not quenched the fires which had blazed up in her heart that morning along the trail to Madam Lisso's. As she sat with him she realized that her dreams of the past week did not compare with the emotion his magnetic presence aroused in her. She faced the truth happily, her eyes embracing the lines of the tall figure, and confessed to herself that, come what might, the path to her heart was for him and for him alone.

"I believe the senor is still dreaming," she said at last in the sweet husky voice that thrilled him as he watched the changing lights in her eyes.

"You are my dream, senorita, the most gorgeous, thrilling dream. You believe me, do you not?"

His eyes had grown soft and daring, and his brown hand crept nearer hers.

"But I refuse to be a dream! Dreams never, never come true."

She threw him a mocking glance and moved farther away to rest against a huge magnolia.

"What brings you by San Miguel today, senor?"

"You!"

"Oh! I thought perhaps you had been to the race at Spanish Lake."

"So I have, senorita. I stopped to get a drink at your pool, hoping for the millionth time to catch a glimpse of you, and for once fortune smiled on me."

She glowed inwardly at his words but treated them with outward indifference.

"Did you go to the race really? Do tell me how it came out. Father and Guydo were to have gone, but they were expecting a call from the Governor in regard to the hunt for that Indian Oca—Oh, I —" She broke off, suddenly.

Bon Villon realized at once that she had stopped in her sentence when she remembered his connection with the half-breed. His face paled with humiliation that he was actually connected in her mind with the loathsome creature, but he could not explain things to her now. Nor could he hope to do so until the bandit chief was out of the country.

Pretending to ignore her confusion, he spoke entertainingly of the race and Ocase's part in it, leaving out nothing but his act in warning the Indian of his danger. He knew, if he told her that, it would raise a greater question in her mind, one that he could not answer for the reason that it was yet a problem to him. Marcelena was interested and excited at the outcome of the race.

"This Indian must be a wonderfully clever person always to be victorious," she said, meeting the dark fire of his hurt eyes and saying to herself all the time, "It is not true; he is not mean or vicious or cold blooded; you may know some things better than I do, Guydo, my brother, but you are wrong about this; this man is—is mine if he wants to be."

Unfortunately Bon Villon could not read her thoughts and imagined she was silent because she was ashamed of being in the presence of a friend of the half-breed. "*Dios!*" he muttered aloud. Marcelena jumped at the word and stared at him in such frank surprise that she threw him into a good humor, and the woods echoed to his ringing laughter. She was so unutterably sweet sitting there and looking at him so strangely. He would tell her of Sabine and his interest in that unfortunate girl. Perhaps that would hold her confidence until he could explain his connection with Ocase.

"You heard me whisper aloud. I was not praying as you thought. On the contrary, I was think-

ing of Ocase and what a world of sorrow he is causing. I have a great compassion for his wife, the lovely little Sabine."

"Oh, do tell me about her. Do you see her often? I have longed for and missed her so. Is she much changed by her terrible experience, senor?"

"Changed—in appearance?"

"Si, senor. She was very lovely, you know."

"She still is lovely,—all white and gold, so petite with her great, appealing blue eyes."

He spoke sincerely, his dark eyes looking far away as he recalled Sabine standing in the door of the little log cabin on the day before while her drunken husband lay in a stupor on the floor within. Marcelena, listening and noting the absorbed look on his face, felt a stab of jealousy. She knew he correctly described her dearest friend. Bon Villon was often in Sabine's company, and men always loved Sabine—

"Shall I tell Sabine you inquired about her? It would please her I'm sure," he said, breaking into her thoughts.

She raised her drooping eyes and caught the look of love and passion he was bending on her. His face so near, his dark eyes so ardent in their worship, caused her to experience a feeling of shame that she had allowed herself to doubt him. She smiled slowly, her soft red lips parting to reveal the beautifully white and even teeth, while little dim-

ples played hide and seek at the corners of her mouth.

"Please do," she finally answered and, wishing to atone for her disloyal thoughts, she gave him messages of love and hope to take to her lovely, unfortunate friend.

The late afternoon sun poured down and the woods around the bayou were close and still. The birds had ceased their squabbling in the trees and the wild beauty of the San Miguel seemed breathless, waiting. The very air with its heavy sweet odors breathed romance. The deep water of the bayou reflected the tall cat-tails and bull-rushes that stretched their colorful beauty along its edges; creamy pond lillies raised their stately loveliness from flat green leaves spread motionless on the still water. The peace and beauty and romance of the place seeped into their blood, bringing warm, languorous emotion.

"Do you still go about cheating hungry panthers of their breakfast, senor?" Marcelena asked, her husky southern voice breaking the dead silence that for several minutes had enveloped them in rapturous contentment.

"I'd like to. I shall have to thank that old panther for the rest of my days. I could not blame him for wanting you, now could I?"

His strong brown hand closed over her slender white one and his dark, burning eyes were close.

"*Amo Vd, querida, amo Vd.* I have loved you from that morning on the trail. I remember how you looked, all you said. You were so frightened, so adorably lovely. I have dreamed of you at night and all day in the shade of my little gallery. I can think of nothing but you. Tell me quickly that you do care: my heart is aching for you. *Amo Vd, querida*—"

His tongue at last freed, Bon Villon poured out to her all the warm emotion that had surged through him since his first meeting with her. The stream at their feet was not more liquid sweet than the music of his rich voice; his tone was as warmly caressing as the faint breeze that swept her cheek. The pressure of his warm hand, the throb of his pulse, all seemed to blend into herself, to become part of her, and to bear her on into strange lands of romance.

Whether he spoke or lapsed into meaningful silence was all the same, she desired nothing better than his presence. To him, it was all a miracle, as if his soul had become separate entities; the restless, tormented part which existed only for a fixed purpose, was undisturbed by this newer, happier subsistence so at peace with the world. He pondered over this, when the last adieux had been said, while he rode against a flaming sunset to Spanish Town.

X.

Thoroughly angered at the escape of Ocase, Sergeant Karet rode thoughtfully toward Spanish Town. The Indian's daring appearance at the race surprised him, but the public flaunting of him and his soldiers in a clear escape cut deep at his pride. He cursed his lack of luck roundly. Since the surrender of Spanish Town to the Americans under Captain Turner on the fifth of the preceding February, the settlement had been in a state of turmoil. The old Spanish inhabitants, still loyal to the Catholic King of Spain, were constantly being stirred up by Don Sebastien's agents who declared that the Americans could not rightfully claim the district under the terms of the Louisiana Treaty and would be forced soon to return it to the Spanish ruler. To this turmoil and uncertainty Ocase's raids contributed no little. The Spanish sympathizers made much of his banditry and contrasted the unsettled state of the country under the United States rule with the peaceful regime of the Spanish authorities before the cession. Governor Claiborne was using every possible means to conciliate public sentiment and to

restore law and order. If he could capture Ocase and break up his outlaw gang, Sergeant Karet felt he would do much to pacify the region and to bring about a stronger loyalty to the new United States government. Because so much depended upon the capture and punishment of the bandit, and because success had seemed so near only to disappear in thin air, Karet was particularly annoyed at the Indian's escape. Swearing softly to himself he approached the fortress.

Spanish Town was enclosed by a stockade of tall cypress posts sharpened at one end and planted firmly in the ground. Dismissing his squad of soldiers within the fort, Karet left the military quarters and walked toward Smith's Tavern. A glass or two of wine at the inn, the social center of the little town, would help restore his good humor.

Smith's Inn was a one story building, built of peeled pine poles spread out with a number of small rooms and sharp roofed additions jammed close together, until the collection resembled a huge, misshapen chicken-coop.

As he approached the inn Karet noticed two strangers enter the building just ahead of him. One, pale and slender, was clad in a priest's hassock, and the other, a stout country fellow, seemed to be his servant. At this time and place, all strangers were objects of suspicion, so the officer followed them into the saloon, a large, smooth floored room in

which were scattered about a number of chairs and tables for drinking and card playing. Karet scrutinized the two men as they talked to Smith, the proprietor. When the two guests had disappeared through the hallway to a small room beyond, Karet walked over to the bar and remarked to Smith, "You have two new guests, I see. Who are they?"

The bartender placed a bottle of wine and a glass before the sergeant.

"Only Father Cingaro, from New Orleans, and his servant. Harmless, simple people both."

Karet drank and, remarking that the evening was yet new, decided he would visit Don Leon Sepulvedor. He imagined that a few hours spent in the company of the charming Senorita Marcelena would banish the ill humor the events at the race had caused. Mounting his horse he rode toward the Bayou San Miguel.

Sergeant Karet Broussard had become acquainted with the don and his family while hunting on the San Miguel soon after his assignment to the little fort, and visited the family often. He valued Don Leon's friendship and appreciated the fact of his controlling influence among both Creoles and Spaniards. On his frequent visits Karet flirted openly with Marcelena who looked forward to and enjoyed the visits of the dashing young Frenchman without giving credence to his amorous protestations. Amata and Guydo, usually present, looked on,

amused at the sallies of the couple. Sometimes serious minded Guydo would bring out his violin and from it coax strange, wild music that filled the deep woods with weird echoes. Then, suddenly, while all were silent under the witchery of his playing he would dash into a gay *fantasio* and the debonnaire sergeant would swing Marcelena in a wild, dashing *fandango*. Karet taught Marcelena many new steps which she learned with such ease and danced so gracefully that the worldly Frenchman was always reluctant to stop.

Sergeant Karet was a Frenchman of the upper class by both birth and breeding. A slave to fashion he wore only clothes of the latest European make, high collars, triple cravats, long sleeves that hid his hands, and boots of polished leather. All eyes were attracted by his striking contrast to the rough settlers, he was a *parti par excellence* in the city, a curiosity in the settlement.

The sun had set and darkness was creeping over the path as Karet rode up to the Sepulvedor home. Guydo was seated on the gallery playing one of his sad, plaintive melodies, while Don Leon and his wife sat listening idly. On the doorstep Marcelena was teasing her pet kitten.

"Pray do not let me stop the concert," said the sergeant seating himself on the step beside Marcelena after the exchange of greetings. "On with the music."

He waved to Guydo who gladly took up his bow and continued the sad, strange music.

"Oh, Guydo," cried Marcelena later in the evening. "You drive me wild with that dirge. Can't you see the sergeant is bored with your sad tunes? Come, play us a merry air, I am dying to dance. And you, sir," she turned to Karet. "Maybe a dance with me will chase away the blue devils."

The Frenchman rose to his feet without further urging, and as Guydo obligingly swung into a dance melody, he and Marcelena began to dance upon the gallery.

Sapristi!" exclaimed Karet as Marcelena moved through the figures with extraordinary grace. "I would like to see you in silk at a ball in New Orleans, senorita."

"Are the ladies charming, Monsieur Karet?" she asked, curious to know something of the world beyond the settlement.

"Very charming, but they would fade to insignificance were you there."

"Why do you say that, Monsieur Karet? Indeed, you are only laughing to yourself at the figure I should cut among your fine ladies."

"*Dieu,* no! Mam'selle, I swear it. You would be the fairest in the ball room and eclipse them all."

Marcelena's strange, deep eyes were so entrancing in their demand for details that he went off into a gay description of life in New Orleans.

"Ah, senorita, I know what you would enjoy most—a masked ball at the Theatre D'Orleans. *Dieu,* they are magnificent."

"Oh, but I should love it," Marcelena declared enthusiastically.

"You would create a sensation. I can imagine the envious looks of the men when we dance the Spanish fandango. It would make the New Orleans ladies green with envy to see you wear the yellow shawl and black hat of Senora Amata."

Guydo continued to play and they moved on in the dance.

"Indeed, senorita, even Paris does not excel the ladies of New Orleans in magnificence and politeness. If you doubt this you should attend the Theatre D'Orleans on first nights, see the beautiful and bewitching Calve in 'Le Norma' and 'La Fille du Regiment' with the elite of New Orleans, the crowded hotels, noted men and women from all over this southland. *Mon Dieu!* The beautiful ladies glittering in toilettes from ateliers of the great modistes, Olympe and Sophie, with their retinue of slaves and carriages. Indeed, senorita, it is to laugh at Paris."

Marcelena enjoyed Karet's conversation. It sparkled with good humor, and revealed to her the gay life he had led, but her heart gave no extra beats for him. The eyes of another, dark and serious, rose before her while she listened to the ser-

geant, eyes not so sparkling, perhaps, as those of the gay Frenchman, but eyes that held for her more fascination.

After the dance Marcelena and Karet resumed their seats on the steps. She had heard how Chief Ocase had outwitted the sergeant at the race that afternoon and, without revealing the source of her information, began to tease him about his lack of success. For once the witty Karet had nothing to say.

"Never mind, sergeant, perhaps some other night he will disguise himself and dine with you at Spanish Town to give you another chance at him," she laughed.

But the officer was not amused. His annoyed frown returned and, to Marcelena's surprise, suddenly remarking that it was late and time for him to go, he made his adieux to the family and bowed himself off, feeling that Marcelena was enjoying his disconfort, but liking her none the less for her keen sense of humor.

On his way through the woods to the fort he allowed his thoughts to wander far into the Dollette Hills to a face that haunted him with its alluring beauty, drifting in and out of his dreams, mocking him in the dim starlight.

"I am playing with fire," he thought. "Well, let it be so—I live but once. 'Tis no fault of mine that

she is the wife of another." And he fell to wondering who that husband could be.

On arriving at Smith's Tavern he found a big log fire and candles lighting the great saloon. Two pretty bar maids, Fellisse and Petra, were serving drinks to the men seated at the tables. Here, in one colorful gathering, were Americans, French and Spanish, each showing his nationality by his clothes and manners.

Karet let his eyes wander over the room.

At a table near the center of the saloon sat the priest Cingaro and his servant, both of whom he had seen earlier in the evening when they had first come to the inn. Near these two, but so placed as not to see them, was Senor Bon Villon in earnest conversation with a man whose back was toward Karet.

This was no other than Ocase himself, and what the sergeant thought was earnest conversation was Bon Villon's endeavor to arouse the Indian to the danger in thus exposing himself so publicly for the second time that day.

"I'm happy, Cap. I dont give a damn for the sogers. They can't catch me. I'll slip through their fingers like an eel. Hell, do you think I'll be forced to eat and run by any damned officers? Ough, look out for yourself."

He pulled his felt hat more closely over his malevolent eyes and continued to eat his dinner.

"Then, for Gad's sake, be careful," cautioned Bon Villon, looking with disgust at the wolfish manners of the half-breed, who finished his meal, pushed his chair away from the table and leaned back against the wall as if preparing for a nap.

"His guards are along," thought Bon Villon, noticing Lebo and Joe who were lounging near the door, and Kenny, up at the bar. "I know he can at least count on their support."

At this moment he was swept with a wave of real apprehension as he saw Sergeant Karet enter the saloon, glance in his direction, then make his way to the Spaniard's table within ten feet of which sat the man whose capture he wanted more than anything else on earth.

"Ah, Senor Bon Villon, is it not?" asked the sergeant, stopping at his chair. "I am Karet Broussard, senor, and I have been awaiting a chance to make your acquaintance."

"Monsieur Broussard," replied Bon Villon in French as he rose. "I have often seen you and I am happy to meet you."

"Then come and join me, senor, at the savoury board."

"I have just finished dining, thank you, monsieur."

Bon Villon was glad to meet the genial Frenchman of whom he had heard so much, but he feared

some scheme was afoot against Ocase and kept himself on guard.

Karet took a seat at the table and remarked in his easy, social manner: "Then we will have something to drink. Smith has some rare old wines. *Dieu!* A long ride is conducive to our appetites, eh, senor? This way, Smith," he called as Smith came waddling between the tables.

"Whew, who can that man be?" the Frenchman asked, pointing to Ocase whose vociferous snores rose loud and clear. "An aggravating sonata from the mouth and nose, *Dieu!*"

He struck a comical pose as if struck by the musical performance, and Bon Villon could not hide a broad smile at the situation.

"Now, Monsieur Smith," continued Karet as Smith arranged the supper on the table. "Give us wine, and Smith, I entreat you to make it the expressed juice from the vintage of France. It tops our ideas, yes, senor?"

"Indeed, monsieur, there is nothing like it for creating new ideas and sociability. Its taste of the old country mellowed by age graciously soothes the palate and stimulates the mind."

"Oui, senor—and after this tribute to wine, confess, now, that you had a cellar filled with rare old stuff in Spain. Did you not, yes?"

"I plead guilty, monsieur."

And from this they launched into tales of adven-

ture, each attempting to surpass what the other told. Their spirits rose under the influence of the wine.

The priest Cingaro sat leaning forward. His whole attention centered on Bon Villon who, unconscious of the evil snake-like gaze, continued to enjoy himself.

"You have led me aright, Ballaco" the priest was saying in his soft, purring voice. "It is he. I know him, the handsome dog. Ah, you have your stilleto, Ballaco? By the prophets, if chance favors you, then good—but stay, alive if possible, remember, alive until—I see our man Drake here. That is well."

"Smith!" called Karet.

Smith hustled up, his small legs carrying his big stomach with difficulty through the crowd to the Frenchman's table. Smith had to establish a center of gravity peculiar to himself to keep poised.

"What can I do for you, Monsieur Karet?" he asked, his fat smile giving sanction before the request was made.

"May the Senor Bon Villon and myself dance, Friend Smith? Will you lend us your Fellisse and Petra for awhile?"

The innkeeper rested the waiter upon his convenient stomach and called to the barmaids. The sergeant had partaken of the wine more freely than Bon Villon but both were in high humor when the

maids came up, rosy and smiling. Smith moved tables and got the music ready as Karet and Bon Villon prepared to dance.

"Now, senor, choose your partner. I take Fellisse for mine, eh, *petite* Fellisse?"

The Spaniard bowed gallantly before Petra, then followed Karet and Fellisse to the cleared space in the middle of the room.

The music started. The talk died down and all in the room from the Reverend Father Cingaro to the two Mexicans, Lebo and Joe with their red handkerchiefs tied about their heads, forgot their drinks for a time to watch the graceful couples gliding through a dreamy waltz. They had circled the room a few times when the music of the violin and guitar quickened and the dance changed to a Spanish fandango. At the sound of the wild air Bon Villon's stern, sedate manner deserted him entirely. Backward, forward, whirling, bending, the dance went on as he showered compliments upon the rosy barmaid. The priest sat pale and motionless. The peculiar smile never left his face but the venom of a prodded rattler darted from his heavy lidded eyes whenever the handsome Bon Villon danced near.

The dance finished, Bon Villon and Petra rested beside the bar while Karet and Fellisse passed the drinks.

"Ah, *ma petite* Fellisse, I was with a gay, *petite fille today,*" said the sergeant.

"Name of misfortune, monsieur, was she better to look at than I?" asked Fellisse, red lips pouting.

"She was very beautiful," he replied in a teasing voice.

"Who is this madamoiselle, this heart of desire, you find so beautiful? Tell me at once!" she pouted, tapping Karet's cheek with a finger which he instantly caught and kissed.

"Ah, *non, non.* Do not quarrel with me, sweet Fellissee."

"No sweet to me, *ma pere. Dieu!* And you flirting with another girl." She drew away from him with a saucy toss of her head.

"Be not frantic, *ma belle* Fellisse. It was the Senorita Marcelena Sepulvedor, the San Miguel beauty."

Petra looked around in surprise as Bon Villon straightened up very suddenly, his flushed face going deadly white.

"The Senorita Marcelena, indeed!" answered Fellisse. "Would you flirt with that haughty thing?"

"But she is not haughty, *ma petite* Fellisse," insisted Karet, his tongue thick from too much wine.

"She is, too, the hateful thing. Can't stoop to speak to me."

"I do not think—" began Karet but Bon Villon had stepped in front of him.

"Stop! Not another word of this!"

As Fellissee started to say something he silenced her with an angry flash from his black eyes.

"What ails you, senor?" she asked, backing away from him bewildered.

"Are you mad, Senor Bon Villon?" asked Karet, looking foolishly about.

"Mad? Yes, I am surprised and furious to hear you mention the name of a lady in *this* place!"

"I was speaking of the Senorita Marce- - -"

"Hold! You cannot mention that name in this saloon."

"You are too arbitrary, senor, too commanding," said the Frenchman with a shrug. "I mean nothing toward the senorita but respect."

"Is it respectful to make her the subject of conversation in a bar-room?"

Bon Villon's tone was sharp. The sergeant's face flushed.

"Senor Bon Villon, your judgment has surely left you. This is my affair." And he coolly waved the matter aside.

"It is my affair—I shall make it so!"

"*Mon dieu!* Do you wish to insult me?" Karet flung back excitedly. "No Spanish *spy* can call me to account."

"Monsieur Karet, I am no *spy*. That is not my business in Louisiana. Apologize for that remark you damn Cajun or I'll run you through."

"To hell with apologies, Senor Bon Villon. I know how to resent an insult. You have said enough—your Spanish blood needs cooling. Draw and we will settle this now."

Their anger began to sober them.

"Clear a place here." Karet called to one of his soldiers present.

The man quickly moved chairs and tables to give a good fighting place. The guests, sensing the impending duel, pushed back their chairs and watched with interest. The noise awoke Ocase. He sat up his keen eyes measured the two combatants. The very tall, erect Spaniard and the Frenchman of medium height and compact build, stood facing each other. Bon Villon's eyes were clear with decision. The sergeant's emitted fire and resolution. The wine had fired the Spaniard's blood but had steadied Karet's impulsive nature. Both stood with unsheathed swords.

Cingaro looked on with pleasure.

"By Saint Peter, Bellaco, look! This is extraordinary, a miracle. I will offer thanks during a score of years if the Frenchman kills him. By Jago! They are boiling hot. Behold Satan, thy potent agency, wine. I invoke thee to spare him not."

"Be careful," whispered Bellaco to the gloating priest who was forgetting himself in his exultant excitement.

"Ah, handy Bellaco. I will do as you say and may the point of the Frenchman's sword transfix him."

The *ravole* in the room died down. All eyes were watching the duellists in breathless silence.

"Are you ready?" asked Karet.

Bon Villon bowed.

"We make the salute, senor, to show all courtesy to him you would kill. *A vous l'honneur.*"

"*Par obeissance,*" replied Bon Villon. He made a courteous distance lunge and saluted. They made the parry, the carte, and then the reverse of *le grand salut.*

"Fight now!" cried Karet, giving vent to the anger that swirled hotly in him.

Their sword points touched and glided together with lightning swiftness, rasping from edge to edge as they crossed and recrossed, filling the room with their clangor.

"Ah, senor, you have the candle light full in your face," said the Frenchman cooly.

"So I have," replied his opponent equally as cooly.

Their swords glided together again, the wicked, slendor blades whirling swift and bright as flashes of light. Karet had led the attack, but it soon dawned on him that here was a duellist such as he had never before encountered. With a beautiful, easy pressure of *forte on foible,* Bon Villon kept himself completely covered from the Frenchman's lunges. Then suddenly he twisted Karet's sword

from him and sent it flying over the bar and among Smith's bottles. The Spaniard lowered his sword.

"I am fully satisfied, monsieur."

"Not I," replied the sergeant, fired with renewed anger at being disarmed.

His friend Stone handed him his sword and they again crossed weapons, the sergeant attacking furiously. But there was something new to him in the sword touch of this Spaniard; he found himself steadily pressed backward and realized that he was no match for his opponent, who parried with ease every thrust he made and spared him the menacing blade many times. He knew he would finally succomb to this master swordsman but he fought on more furiously than ever. Suddenly Bon Villon tripped and fell heavily to the floor, his head striking the hard board.

Karet drew back.

"Strike, strike the dog!" cried Cingaro in a gutteral whisper.

But as the blade advanced it suddenly stopped. Karet could not thrust at a helpless foe. But, even as he stayed his hand, his wrist was seized and his sword clattered to the floor. The half-breed whose snoring had disturbed him earlier in the evening had disarmed him.

"Fool!" cried the Frenchman. "I would not kill a senseless man!"

Ocase gave him a keen, searching look and then

lifted the Spaniard's half conscious form to a sitting position. Karet came at once to his assistance.

With a muttered "My thanks, m'sieu," Ocase released his friend to the sergeant. Then he straightened himself with all the dignity of an Indian, his steady black eyes looking at Bellaco.

"You tripped the captain, you dirty dog, and I am going to wring your neck for it!"

Surprised at the detection of his treachery, Bellaco sprang to his feet. He whipped out his pistol and fired, seemingly at Ocase but the bullet tore a hole in the floor close to Bon Villon's head. He then bolted through the crowd and would have escaped easily had not Joe and Lebo seized him.

"Tie him, Joe!" yelled Ocase.

The bandit's followers bound the struggling Bellaco with a stout cord and threw him on the floor.

Senor Bon Villon had regained consciousness and was standing now, listening to Karet's account of what had happened. As he finished the sergeant held out his hand.

"I bear you no enmity, Senor Bon Villon, and I regret sincerely what I said. I was acting under the influence of wine, as you know, and I apologize. Cannot we still be friends?"

The Spaniard grasped his hand. He wanted a friend, one just like this young Frenchman whom he knew was a man of refinement and honor. The

gallant, impulsive Karet had interested him until the name of Marcelena was mentioned, and even now, thought he had forgiven Karet's words and the duel, he felt a pang of jealousy when he thought of the unexpected friendship existing between the sergeant and Marcelena. Karet took him back to where Jose had tossed Bellaco, close to where a rascal named Drake was sitting.

As they came near Karet said, "These fellows were trying to kill you, senor, just as hard as I was. *Mon Dieu,* you must have a charmed life."

Pretending to try to get free Bellaco kicked over Drake's chair and in the confusion that followed, Drake cut the cords that bound Bellaco's wrists and put the knife in his hands. Getting up hastily Drake walked out, leaving Bellaco striking and whirling his body around as if still tied. Suddenly, to the surprise of the crowd, he jumped up and darted through the door after Drake.

"*Le diable!* The rascal is escaping. Look!" cried Karet.

Followed by the sergeant, Bon Villon dashed out of the door in pursuit. The two, aided by Ocase and his Mexicans, rushed futilely about in the dark. The conspirators had climbed the barricade and sought shelter in the dark woods where successful recapture was impossible. Karet and Bon Villon baffled and indignant returned to the inn.

"What does this mean?" asked the soldier, voicing

the Spaniard's own thoughts. "Senor, you probably know this fellow who sought your life."

"I cannot be sure, monsieur. I can only suspect."

"Whom do you suspect, senor? I should like to help you."

"It is impossible to tell you, my friend, I am not sure enough to mention names."

"You are mysterious, senor. You surprise me."

"Then, with your kind permission, we will forget the whole affair of the evening."

"Certainly, senor. I hope, however, that if I can ever do you a service you will call on me."

"I will not hesitate to do so if I need help. Thanks very much, monsieur."

And with this response Bon Villon dismissed the subject. They entered the saloon and seated themselves at a table as if nothing had happened, such was the every day life of the early Louisianian. In the meantime, Cingaro, taking advantage of Bon Villon's absence and the confusion resulting from Bellaco's escape, had disappeared lest he be seen and recognized.

"Now, senor, will you do me a favor?" asked Karet, lighting a cigarette.

"With pleasure."

"I wish to know if you can inform me concerning a lovely lady whose name I do not know. I fancy you know her for she lives near you in the Dolette Hills. I came suddenly upon her only the

day before yesterday in the forest. She was sitting like a lost fairy upon a tree, but, alas, she fled, to my despair, and has left me wondering ever since."

"I think I can satisfy your curiosity on that score, Monsieur Karet."

"Good! How forunate I am to have made your acquaintance, senor," he grinned boyishly.

"And to think that only a few minutes ago we were flying at each other's throats!" laughed Bon Villon.

"*Mon Dieu!* But we did not know the desirable qualities in one another's company.

They smiled sheepishly at each other as Karet waited impatiently for the information he so desired.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, monsieur, but the senora you so admire has a husband."

"Indeed, then it is true? She told me as much but seemed so young I found it hard to believe. Who is her husband, senor?"

"She is the wife of Ocase Mataha!"

Karet sprang from his chair.

"*Non, non! Par bleu,* senor, surely you joke."

"Unfortunately, it is not a joke."

The soldier sank back in his chair, grieved incredulity written all over his face.

"Who was she before, senor?"

"She was the granddaughter of Madame Lisso."

"How could she ever have become the Indian's wife?" asked the Frenchman disgustedly.

"It is a sad story, monsieur, one that I hate to dwell on. Most any one here can tell you the circumstances as they are known all over the country."

"Thank you, senor. I will not press you further."

They tried to converse on other topics but Karet's gay, careless manner had deserted him. The conversation lagged. Finally they parted for the night with a feeling of new found friendship, and shook hands with a promise soon to meet again. Sergeant Karet returned to his quarters in the fort, and Bon Villon left for the long ride to his home in the Dolette Hills. As he rode out of Spanish Town Ocase and his two Mexicans drew up beside him, and under their silent escort he rode away, his thoughts occupied by this second attempt on his life.

XI.

Puzzled by the events at Smith's Inn, Bon Villon remained at home for several days. The man who had tripped him while he was fighting Sergeant Karet, might have acted in sympathy for the Frenchman who was plainly more deeply under the influence of liquor than his opponent. It might also, have been pure coincidence that Madame Lisso's warning had seemed to tally so well with the two possible attempts on his life. In the unsettled state of this country so many things happened, and were taken as a matter of course. His supposed connection with Ocase Mataha might have motivated an attempt on his life—Though tantalized by such reasoning, instinct warned that his game of hide and seek awith the enemy had succeeded. That the black menace from across the sea was near.

Until he was sure, however, he would wait and watch. Unable to enter Spain for reasons known only to himself, he was compelled to depend on his agents there who as yet had accomplished nothing. As the days lengthened into a week, with no new developments, his hopes began to fade, and it was

then that he had some bad times with himself, often brooding, confronting some inner problem of his own.

This early mid-September morn, as he sat at breakfast, Bon Villon considered riding over to Spanish Town for the day. Breakfast is always a leisurely affair in Louisiana. Here you feel as well as see the morning. The cool dampness of dew drenched woods and hills is delightful. Then, quite suddenly, another tropical day is in progress.

Mulatto pottering nervously about in the kitchen, was told to saddle Midnight and bring him around to the front.

"Yas suh, I'll have dat hoss cotched and saddled fo' you can say scat, Marse Villon," the nigger replied. "I s'picioned you'se gwine to need Midnight dis mawnin' an guv him er good bate er cawn, mos' er croker sack full, hits plum scandlous de way dat hoss eats."

"Here, give me another cup of coffee and whatever is on your mind, out with it! I'm in a hurry this morning."

"Lawdy, I 'clare ter goodness, Marse Villon, how cum you can tell I'se got sumpin' on my mind dis mawnin?"

"I am familiar with your symptoms, Mulatto."

"Yas-suh, sho' dat's 'zackly what I'se got. I hates ter trubble you dis mawnin', Marse Villon,

whilst you is in sech er hurry and all sot to visit wid de white ladies."

"The hell you say! What do you know about me and the ladies?"

"I'se heerd talk uv hit at de fort. Dey 'low as how you is sho' a conquerin' angel wid de ladies at Spanish Town."

"The are quite too complimentary to me at Spanish Town. Who gave you your information?"

"I got date inflamation fum de collored folks at de fort. Dey 'low as how you tucken dance fust, den fit, all in one night ovuh Mis' Petra."

"The mischief you say!" Bon Villon looked down at his plate, a flush stealing over his neck and face.

"Yas-suh, folk's bound ter talk. Dem yaller gals at de fort ax me is hit so and I felt pow'ful put out, I kin tell you, 'case when dey 'lows all dis done happen and I ain't heerd a word bout hit."

"Well, now that you have heard it, what's worrying you?"

"Well, Marse Villon, corse I ain't nothin' but er nigger, but yit and still I'se got muh notions same as de whites, an I'se gittin' older ebery day, an dat night at de fort I 'lows as what I'se in de exact place ter study dis question er lub."

"Well, did you decide on yellow love or black?" his master asked, grinning into his plate.

"Go 'way, Marse Villon, you knows I ain't atter no black nigger."

"So you *are* after a yellow one, then?"

"Hits lak dis, Marse Villon. I'se ben co-tin' dat gal er yeah dis comin' Chuesday, an t'other night at de fort me an Liza wuz sittin' lazy lak befo' de fiah in dat little shed room in de back yard uv de inn, when all unbeknowingst ter me de doar open an in cum er long, black nigger whut look lak er African gorillo mo' en whut he favors hisself. Liza seed dat nigger furst and gin ter back er way frum me, an when I sidles up closter she tucken just fight me off. Den I seed dat nigger standin' dar and I s'picion right den. I ris up an ax dat black fool whut he prowlin' round fer, an he 'lows fer nothin' in tic'lar. Den I tuck en tole him he bettah saunter summers else, and he ups and 'lows whut's I got ter do wid hit. Den he smile at Liza knowin' lak. At dat I got rampantin' mad and hopped on dat nigger wid all foah foots. I sez, 'You ole pore corn-pone nigger, I'll 'swade you.' An, lawdy, Marse Villon, dat wuz de time I need dat razor you gimme an I done lef' hit at home, dat black fool done got me down on de flo' fore I knows hit, and wuz lambastin' me wid his fists an me couldn't git no more toe holt in de flo' dan I could fly. But, bress de lawd, Liza wuz still dar an she grob er skillet an, lawdy, Marse Villon," Mulatto slapped his knees with delight. "He! He! Dat gall gin ter lambas' dat nigger. Lawdy, he! he! She sho' mus' hav er streak er Chickasaw in her fum de way she beat dat

fool wid de skillet. It wuz plum scand'lous. Den he broke an run outer dare so fas' I wuz plum 'stonished. Lawdy, he! he!"

Mulatto clapped his hands and bent double with laughter at the remembrance, showing an inch of blue gums above his white teeth.

"I bounger dats one nigger whut b'leeves in de Scripture whut say 'Hits more bettah ter dwell in de wilderness dan wid a contenshious 'oman, sho!"

"Well, how did you come out? Did Liza throw dishwater on you later?"

"Dat she didn't, Marse Villon. She greased my win'pipe an pulled up muh pallet and 'lows I'se her man for sho! Aain't dat de simples' kind uv co'tin' fer us fightin' men?"

"Very simple, but a little strenuous for all that."

"Yas-suh, dat's right. We needs de right impliments. Ain't nobody fix ter fight outen deys got dere razor. I'se been studyin' as how as I'se lef' here right smart by meself, and no longer dan las' night dat ole pan'ter cried all night in de hills—ain't you heerd em yourself, Marse Villon? I nebber slep' er wink and when you ain't heah hits sho' lonesum and mak me wish fer a comfortin' pusson eroun! Liza's sho' handy 'roun' er house, Marse Villon."

"Ah, ha! That's it? You think a yellow girl who can weild a skillet would be a comforting person to have about, eh?"

"Yas-suh, you'se got dat zackly right. I wuz jus' fixin' ter ax you ter buy dat gal fer us."

"The deuce? You want to marry her?"

"I sho' does."

"To whom does she belong?"

"She housemaid on Marse Lucien's plantation at Point Coupe."

"Is that so? I know him. He owns a large number of slaves and perhaps will sell one. I will see him and try to buy her."

"Lawdy, Marse Villon, I'se sho' glad to heah you say dat?"

"Are my pistols cleaned and loaded?"

"Dat dey is, suh, as smooth as de road ter destruction."

"Then bring my horse around."

As Bon Villon rode in the direction of Chief Ocase's cabin he tightened his pistol belt and examined both guns carefully,—a precaution he had not taken since coming to Louisiana. It was not his intention to be laid by the heels with a bullet in his back, so he rode to one side of the trail. When he came to the path that led to Ocase's cabin, he turned that way just to say hello to his lonely little neighbor.

Sabine heard his horse's hoof-beat when he rode into the little clearing and waved to him from the cabin door.

"*Buenos dias, senor.*"

"*Buenos dias, amiga.*"

"I am so glad you have come. I was wishing for you."

"Then you must have willed me over, as I am on my way to Natchitoches and only by chance rode by. Has Ocase returned?" he asked, dismounting from his horse and seating himself on the doorstep.

"He has not been home for several days. I heard him mention San Antonio and New Orleans in a conversation with that terrible Joe Sohone. I believe Ocase has gone to one of those places. That is why I was wishing for you to come along. I think this is a good time to visit Granny. If you don't mind I will saddle Antoine and ride that far with you."

"This will be good for you and old Granny too. Get yourself ready and we will make a quick trip of it."

He stepped across the yard with long, swinging strides and was back at the steps in a few minutes to find her ready and locking the cabin door. Pleased and excited over the trip she looked like a huge pink and white doll in her blue dress and wide hat. They had twenty miles to ride and the sun was already high in the heavens, so they rode rapidly over the silent hot hills to plunge as soon as possible into the swamp where it was damp and cool. Here they travelled more slowly, occasionally resting their horses in the dense shade.

Bon Villon lit a cigar and through the smoke, as he rode in silence, he watched the child-like figure on the little horse at his side, all eagerness for the grateful sight of her strange, wrinkled, old grandmother and queer, bewhiskered Asa in their cabin on the Bayou Pierre. Her large hat became tiresome. She took it off and tied it to the horn of her saddle. The thick, golden hair, freed from restraint, framed her pale face like an aureole of captured sunshine.

"Come out of your trance, madam, I'm being ignored. What are you so busy thinking about?"

"Many, many things. You would be surprised."

"You are too young and lovely to think so seriously, madame." Bon Villon chided, still watching her curiously.

"I am not young and lovely—I am old and married."

"My Marcelena says you are gorgeous and adorable and for me to say for her, as I have told you before, that she loves you much more in your absence than she realized when you were with her every day."

Sabine turned in astonishment at his unexpected words. It was pitiful to see the glad light that swept her face, as if heaven had opened suddenly before her making her white and radiant like an angel. Her blue eyes misted as she listened to the messages he repeated. She was so gratified and

happy to hear again that her friends still loved her and would receive her just as they had before she became the wife of the Indian, that the surprise and strangeness of Bon Villon's friendship for Marcelena, and the possessive manner in which he spoke of her, went unnoticed until long afterwards.

As they plunged deeper into the swamp, Sabine grew silent. She had always hated and feared the swamp. It seemed to her a great, soulless monster that jeered in silence at the luckless travelers along its dim trails. Her bright soul demanded sunshine as do the birds and flowers. She was created for joy and gladness; the dark and damp oppressed her, and today the swamp seemed to bring the disastrous wreckage of her life more closely about her heart. Here again, in familiar surroundings, it all seemed more a horrible night-mare than ever before.

She looked at Bon Villon. How handsome he was—how well he rode his black horse—and how good he was to ride with her today. Surely some kind fate, or perhaps God had sent him to Louisiana just when she needed him most. But, what—was the dark shadow that hung over him—what meant the veiled hints from Ocase, that a danger stalked forever at his side—What could he have done to have made such an enemy? She remembered having once tried to question the half-breed about Bon Villon, but Ocase had merely given her

a piercing look, as if to read her motive in asking—grunted—went his way. It was all such a mystery. Why did the senor never mention his family—anyone could tell by his appearance and actions that he was an aristocrat. Even the Sepulvedors were no more cultured—and of money, he seemed to have an unlimited supply. Ocase knew the solution to all this mystery, and for some reason trusted Bon Villon, just the same as the senor, seemed to have a liking for the Indian, but surely, there was no connection—No! And on, and on, went Sabine's thoughts, as the horses traveled single file along the darkened path through the swamp.

It was mid-afternoon when they finally came out into the pines and rested ther horses for awhile in the cool air.

Bon Villon's thoughts had been playing truant to the petite Louisianian riding beside him, and had flown through leafy woods to a long cabin nestled in the midst of magnolia trees, where dwelt one with the lights of old Madrid lying in the depths of her gray eyes. This enchanted spot alone meant the end of the trail for him, and he sighed as they turned in at the little path leading in the opposite direction through the pines.

Sabine, with the swamp behind her, was beginning to enjoy the trip and to look about with excited pleasure. They rode slowly now, letting the tired horses take their time, while familiar places

brought memories of other days. Sabine was impatient to reach her old home and talked happily of each well-known spot along the road.

"See that tree?" she cried, pointing. "Guydo carved our names on it while Marcelena sat in the very top of that old oak. She was always a tomboy."

As she talked and gestured Bon Villon noticed the glint of a ring on her finger.

"Why, you are wearing a new ring," he said.

"No, it is an old ring I have had for a long time."

She held out her hand, and was surprised to see him start, and hear him exclaim under his breath *"Dios! Espossible?"* Her eyes questioned him silently as he caught her hand and continued to examine the ring minutely, holding it close to him and gazing at it in puzzled concentration.

"Where did you get it?" he asked wonderingly.

"It was my mothers. My father gave it to her with a promise that he would return to her, but he never he never came back—Only letters and excuses that soon killed her."

"This is indeed strange!" he almost whispered, giving Sabine a quick, startled look.

"What is so strange about this ring?" Sabine asked, drawing herself a little straighter in her saddle.

"That I have seen it before or one exactly like it,

and was told it was made to order: the only one of its kind."

"Mercy me, then what does it all mean? Where did you see it?" she questioned excitedly.

"In Madrid."

"Then perhaps you have seen my father, senor. Oh please try to remember. You can, can you not?" she begged.

"Who WAS your father, Sabine?" he asked almost sharply.

"I do not know" she replied flushing. Grand'mere never speaks of him. It was always of my beautiful mother she told me."

"Perhaps she will tell me, I'll ask her. This ring puzzles me," he said, more as if thinking aloud than to his companion.

Again he swept Sabine with a long, studied look. Then seeming to remember himself, patted her tiny hand and released it, all unconcious that Senorita Marcelena and the gay Karet, had watched the little scene from a fallen tree at the side of the trail.

"If what I think is true then you are—but I must not think until I can see your grandmother and have a talk with her." Stern and unsmiling Bon Villon continued to think aloud.

Curious at his comment, Sabine endeavored to persuade the Spaniard to tell her what he thought. In vain she tried pleas, threats and pretended pout-

ing. Not only would Bon Villon not satisfy her curiosity but he even became silent and preoccupied. At the foot of the hill upon which stood the cabin of Madame Lisso Bon Villon roused himself.

"Promise me, Sabine, that you will under no condition mention the matter of the ring to Madame Lisso until I have talked to her. As soon as I am satisfied in my own mind I shall tell you what I know."

She promised, though resenting the mystery.

The long afternoon shadows were stretching across the road as Bon Villon and Sabine rode up to the cabin. The place had a lonely, deserted look but Sabine seemed not to mind as she dismounted at the gate and flew about, seeing everything at once. The door was unlocked and she rushed over the cabin in an ecstacy of delight at being home again. She stopped suddenly, head to one side listening.

"Hark, senor! Do you hear that queer noise? That is gran'mere at the graves."

She flew down the path to the spot in the woods where the old woman knelt worshipping at the graves of her dead. Bon Villon could hear the wild chanting of the quavering voice in the still evening, and thought it was little wonder the Indians and ignorant whites looked upon Madame Lisso with awe. Not wishing to intrude on the joyful meet-

ing he remained on the little gallery until they came back together.

Madame Lisso's sunken black eyes were shining as she welcomed the tall senor in her own queer way. Taking him to one side she laid her bony hand on his arm.

"I been trying to see you fer the longest, son. I come nigh goin' to warn ye but me old bones be gitting stiff. I want ter warn ye that a black danger is besettin' ye," she whispered in the strange unnatural voice nature had given her. "Don't ask how 'tis I knows. But 'bide by what ole granny tells ye. Sho' as God's sun is shinin' on us ye air threatened with a treacherous danger. See yonder swamp?" She pointed a bleak finger. "Hit's dark as a wolf's mouth and in hit air panters and snakes but guard again the wolf that lurks aroun' in human form. I warn ye of a hungry beast from another country."

"Another country! What do you mean?"

"How does the gray fox steal the chicken? How does the old witch as I'm called, pry secrets from the dark woods? Don't ax me how I scent my secrets. This be ye second warning."

With that she turned and hobbled to where Sabine was trying to talk to old Asa who had slipped in the back door and now sat, surprised and alarmed, watching every move of Sabine with wondering eyes. Her presence confused his weak mind. To

him she had been long dead and he feared her as a ghost.

Promising to return a few days later and take Sabine back to the Dolette Hills, Bon Villon left. On arriving at Spanish Town an hour and a quarter later he called upon Colonel Lucien, and with considerable tact and persuasion finally succeeded in purchasing the mulatto girl, Liza, for eight hundred dollars. The sale closed, he retired without joining the crowd that caroused in the barroom of Smith's Inn.

At noon the next day he was ready to return home. As he prepared to leave the tavern he met Sam Lafitte, one of the very few settlers who had extended him their friendship. Sam was broad and fat faced with a red moustache that drooped like a water fall over his wide mouth. His French father must have married a huge German frau from the blondness and broadness of him. Sam was a striking contrast to the tall, dark haired Bon Villon. They entered the saloon to have a friendly bottle of wine together.

"Oh, I say, senor," said Sam over their glasses. "You'd better remain in Spanish Town tonight and not go on as you planned. Last night there were two strangers here, as villainous looking characters as I have ever seen, who were asking about you. They wanted to know where you lived, what roads you used in coming to town and a passel of such

information. When I asked them why they wanted to know all this, they couldn't give any very clear reason. I think you'd better stay over and see if you can find those birds."

Bon Villon smiled.

"Thanks, my friend, but I have an appointment early tomorrow morning and I must go on. Thank you for your warning, Lafitte. I'm looking forward to meeting with those fellows." His jaws set hard, and the glimpse Sam caught of the Spaniard's eyes startled him, hardened old settler that he was.

"Hell and the Devil!" he swore as he watched Bon Villon ride out of Spanish Town. "There's something mighty dirty afoot and my caballero knows about it. Well, here's wishing you luck, you young devil," and with this off his mind, Sam Lafitte waddled back into the tavern and up to his favorite place at the bar.

A double warning that would have unnerved most men, seemed to fill Bon Villon with a strange elation. All he had heard seemed to make a clear pattern. But how he detested this lying low. He burned for physical encounter; to hunt, and ferrit out the lair he now knew was near, now—at once. But instinct warned against such obvious moves, and past experience made him heed the warning. The thought that his carefully laid plans might somehow again go wrong tortured him. "*Dios!*" he muttered. "Not again."

Midnight had been covering the ground in long running strides, but slowed down when Bon Villon gripped the reins, as his eyes swept the road ahead. Tracks, horse's tracks, in the soft dirt where there had been none further back. Along here, the woods and underbrush crowded close to the trail. He drew rein and, dismounting, studied the prints carefully. From the spread of the tracks he knew at once they had been made by galloping horses. There were four sets of them—four horsemen. He wondered how far he had come before noticing the prints and, leading his horse by the bridle, he went back along the trail for about fifty yards when they ended abruptly.

"Ah, I thought so," he said to himself. "Here is where they entered the road from the woods. Perhaps I'm getting old womanish but I'll look into this."

Mounting Midnight again he turned aside into the woods, and eyes and ears alert, rode parallel to the trail. Presently he plunged deeper into the woods and spurring his mount galloped ahead for a mile. Dismounting, he tied his horse to a sapling, then cautiously walked to the trail and scrutinized it carefully.

"They have re-entered the woods somewhere between here and the place where I first pickd up their tracks. I'll explore a bit," he thought.

Moving along quietly he crept forward parallel

to the trail and a few hundred yards beyond it. He had just reached a thicket of pines when a slight noise riveted his attention to a spot only a few yards away. He dropped to his stomach and lay motionless, listening.

"Ssh, I thought I heard a noise," said a voice so close that it startled him.

"Oh, you didn't hear nothing. Didn't I tell yer twarn't no hurry; we'd hafto wait a damn long time?"

Bon Villon snaked his way closer to the thicket and parted the bushes silently. Before him, in a little glen, sat four ruffians, their rifles across their laps. He recognized Bellaco as the villain who had tripped him at Smiths' Inn the evening of the duel, another he thought was a member of Ocase's gang but the other two were unknown to him.

"Did they tell ye he was sho' to be comin' this er way?" growled one of the strangers impatiently.

"Yep, said he was sartain to."

"Fearless as a tiger and carries luck along in his pocket, but we'll git the fine Senor Bon Villon this whack, nothin' to stop us iffen he don't drap dead afore he gits this fer."

Bon Villon's lips became a line of gray and his eyes blackened as he watched the four unsuspecting villains. His fingers twitched around the pistol in his hand. "Hirelings," he thought. "I'll teach

them, and that treacherous tripper will be the first to—"

Suddenly there was a movement. The bandit member of Ocase's gang leaped to his feet and screamed "The Phantom Rifleman!" Before his astonished companions could speak there came the sharp, quick report of a rifle and the man who had cried out fell forward to the ground.

With cries of the "Phantom Rifleman!" the three survivors sprang to their feet and crashed in terror through the woods in mad flight. A little white smoke curled upward a few rods away where two tall pines stood apart. Looking at this spot, Bon Villon could only murmur, "*Es possible!*" Before he could recover himself the figure that had stood framed between the two trees noiselessly glided away into the depths of the forest.

With a start Bon Villon remembered it was the seventeenth and marvelled that the rifleman never failed to detect one of the outlaw gang and send him to his death on that date. Grateful for the shot that had disbanded his foe, the Spaniard rose to his feet and walked up to the dead man. It was indeed a member of the half-breed's gang.

Twenty minutes later Bon Villon found his horse and rode thoughtfully through the long shadows of evening to his home. There he found Mulatto awaiting him. Reporting the successful purchase of Liza and the promise of her presence in the cabin

within a day or two, the caballero sat down to his supper.

The pale moon, rising late, saw him on his little gallery wrapped in thoughts as dark and foreboding as the ominous hills about him.

XII.

It was late in the afternoon of the seventeenth. At the door of Jose's cabin on the edge of the swamp sat Cingaro. His heavily lidded eyes were fixed upon the trail down which Bellaco and his three accomplices had ridden early that morning. Impatience and anticipation held him in their grasp and he stirred uneasily upon his rough bench. Since noon he had sat there, and now the afternoon sun was gliding slowly down the west and still Bellaco had not returned.

The afternoon aged. Long black fingers of shadow, lengthening as the sun declined, stretched out across the swamp, groping, clutching, enveloping more and more of the woods in their dark grasp. The birds ceased their throaty farewells to the dying day and the frogs and the night prowlers awaked to activity. In the west burned a few streaks of red and yellow and orange. Gradually these faded into gray and then into velvety black.

A hundred times the priest had started eagerly from his seat as his ears caught some sound from the

forest, and a hundred times he sank back upon his bench disappointed.

The waters of the swamp were black in the twilight when at last came the unmistakable sounds of horse's hoofs. Cingaro's face brightened as he peered into the gathering darkness, then changed; the sound was that of a single rider. Faint misgivings overcast his expectation as he rose and walked forward to meet Bellaco.

Throwing the reins over the head of his horse Bellaco came forward uncertainly.

"Where are the others?" screeched Cingaro in a high, excited key.

"I don't know, father," replied Bellaco in a tired, discouraged tone that shattered the priest's hope that they might be following with a prisoner.

"You don't know! What do you mean, fool?"

"I don't know where but-t o-o-one of t-them is, the others-s left suddenly, f-father."

The servant was mortally afraid of his master's wrath and the fearful shock he had received on the Bayou Scie road that afternon had wrecked his courage. Cingaro saw that something terrible was amiss, and tried to control his rising temper, though his face was livid with suppressed anger.

"I w-will tell you a-about it, f-father," quavered Bellaco. "We s-sat in the w-woods w-waiting for him, for Bon Villon, when the Phantom Rifleman k-killed Jake."

"Who is the Phantom Rifleman?" yelled the priest.

"I c-can'y s-say, father. We were lying in wait to lasso Bon Villon and get him alive when t-there was a t-terrible sound like an earthquake, and Jake fell over crying 'The Phantom Rifleman!' And t-there in plain sight stood an awful object in white waving its arms at us. And that's the last I knew until I found myself on my horse running him as fast as I could."

Bellaco's voice sank to a hoarse whisper and cracked on the last word.

"What became of Bon Villon?" asked the priest, his white lips working over his teeth in an effort at self-control.

"We never did see him!"

Bellaco trembled at the anger in the master's eyes.

"What could I do when all the others fled?" he quavered. "The phantom shot at Jake and the three men I had hired took to their heels."

Cingaro watched him with cold, unemotional eyes. Though he did not understand the talk about this phantom rifleman, he could see that a terrible fright had been thrown into his servant and that this might defeat his own plans unless it were promptly dealt with. He must quiet Bellaco's fears and try again.

"It was no ghost, my son, you may rest assured of that," he said in his usual soft purr, trusting

that Bellaco's faith in his priestly powers would lend weight to his words. "You have strong emotions, but no head to balance them, and it is well you have in me a guide to lead you. You are needlessly alarmed, my good Bellaco, but I shall arm you against wicked spirits, for none but the wicked appear. Here is a potent charm, a little silver chain from Jerusalem. Take it and fear no ghosts or devils as long as you wear it. Now go, find again our scattered friends and meet me tomorrow at our rendezvous near Spanish Town. We shall try again this time, by St. Jago, we will not fail."

Relieved that he had escaped so easily from the angry storm he so feared, Bellaco turned his horse and disappeared down the path.

The morning after Bon Villon's experience with the mysterious rifleman he rode in the direction of the Bayou San Miguel. The secret that had festered so long in his breast faded into the background as his mind centered upon Marcelena. There was a feeling of excitement in his heart. Thoughts of her brought a new vision of life. Again and again her dark vivid face rose before him—her voice—the things she said. He was happy and before long was fording the Bayou San Miguel and looking about in search of his sweetheart.

But Marcelena was not to be seen. Tieing his horse he hastened on eager feet along the course of the stream, ears and eyes alert. Rounding a little

clump of bushes he heard a soft voice raised questioningly, "And why not the Senor Bon Villon?"

"Ah, *querida mia,* are you hiding from me?" he asked, his rich, deep tones vibrating with emotion.

There was an answering gasp and, parting the undergrowth before him, Bon Villon stopped enchanted. There, within the shade of the grape vines beside the pool, the trees casting waving shadows over her, she sat. A great sumac bush flung its carmine leaves about her and into the pool at her feet. How beautiful she was in her pose of startled surprise, the lights in her gray eyes thrilled and filled his soul with exquisite rapture as she turned a startled, tragic look at him.

"I have searched up and down the bayou for you, *querida,* and had about made up my mind to go to your home when I heard you call me."

She remained silent, her expression of surprise giving way to a look that baffled him; it seemed as if a film of ice had been drawn over the deep pools of her eyes. He felt chilled.

"You seem surprised to see me, *querida,* as if you did not name the place and time at our last meeting. Did you forget? How could you, my beautiful, when it has never been absent from my thoughts for a single moment?"

Smiling he parted the vines farther and entered her sylvan retreat.

"*Sientese,* Senor Bon Villon, you have paid me

back in full for spying on you the day I caught you making faces at Little Frog. I surely must have been far away in dreams not to have heard you approaching. My eyes betrayed me for a moment. I mistook—but you are here now. Let us be seated."

The coldness of her tone and the uncompleted sentence struck him unpleasantly.

"Did you mistake me for your brother?"

"No, Senor Bon Villon. Guydo is at Spanish Town."

"Your father, perhaps?"

"Non, my father is enjoying a *siesta* at this hour."

"Well, whom did you take me for, beautiful one?" he said.

He attempted to capture her hand, and looked with ardent uncertainty into her eyes with their cold lights half-hidden in a manner new to him. She retained the freedom of her hand and drew away from him.

"Sergeant Karet Broussard often comes this way," she replied coldly.

A queer pain of surprised jealousy answered her unexpected thrust, and Bon Villon felt the hot flush that swept his neck and face. He raised his reclining position at her feet and looked her straight in the face as if seeking there the answer to her unusual attitude.

"Are you trying to make me jealous today,

senorita? 'Twould be an easy thing to do."

"*Gracias,* no. Such a pastime would not be sufficiently interesting, Senor Bon Villon."

He now gazed at her in real surprise. He detected the intentional sting in her words, a calculated coldness in her attitude that puzzled and hurt him. He tried to think what he had done to merit such a reception, while his dark eyes pleaded with her, a tender worship struggling in them with the doubt and uncertainty raised by her words.

"Sergeant Karet is our good friend—you are not implying more, senorita?"

"Sergeant Karet is many things. He is handsome, and gay and sincere."

Her voice stressed the last word as she checked off on her fingers the soldier's attractions. If only she could make him think that she did not care. She must mask her hurt with coldness, bitterness, put on a bold front that he might not still believe her the susceptible dupe she had been. There was only one thing to do—hurt this handsome, heartless Spaniard's self esteem with scorn and contempt, even as he had made her suffer by unfaithfulness. The thought brought a cold fury of hate to quiet the tumult that raged in her brain. For the first time she allowed her gaze to meet him squarely.

Until now Bon Villon was puzzled to know the

meaning underlying his sweetheart's strange manner. He half believed she was playing him a trick and expected at any moment she would laugh and tell him so. Now he saw the cold little demons dancing in the half-closed eyes regarding him contemptuously, and knew that she was not playing with but was deliberately torturing him. This revelation instantly cooled his ardor and caused his anxious, dark eyes to change to black diamonds, his lips to a straight line. He reached for his sombrero.

"I fear I have made a mistake in presuming that you expected me here today. If you will pardon the intrusion I will take myself to a more welcome spot."

Marcelena sat straight and still as he arose to go while a terrible pain tore and twisted at her heart. Deep, deep down in her tortured self she fought a mad desire to grovel at his feet, to forgive all, if only to feel his arms about her once again. Pride, anger and all feeling but hunger for him was swept away as she saw him part the curtain of vines, and watched him bow cooly without once glancing her way.

"*Buenos tardes, senorita.*"

"*Adios, senor,*" she heard herself say as though in a nightmare while the vines closed behind him.

Bon Villon strode to where his horse was tethered. A feeling of cold rage oppressed his senses. Strange,

mad impulses swept over him. He longed to return to the grape arbor and wring the truth from her. His horse whinnied a greeting as he unhitched him but the seething turmoil in his brain made him oblivious of everything. He was many miles away on the Spanish Trail before his anger subsided and his common sense helped him back to sane reasoning. Something had happened, something more than she had told. He scouted the thought that she was the changeable minx she would have him believe. Some vile gossip had reached her ears—could Sergeant Karet Broussard stoop to that? No, it was unbelievable, and yet she had said—

Round and round the scene on the bayou revolved in his thoughts. His world seemed to spin itself to hollow nothingness. Day followed day with only memories for company.

XIII.

Breakfast was over at Smith's Inn but Sergeant Karet still sat at his table, lost in brooding thoughts. During the latter part of August he had been exceedingly busy with his military duties. Governor Claiborne had met General Wilkinson at Alexandria for a military council. In their discussions it had become plain that the American forces were not sufficiently strong for an immediate attack on the Spanish General Herra who was encamped with his troops on the Sabine River. Some step, however, had to be taken lest American passivity be taken as an acceptance of the Spanish claim to the Neutral Strip. Accordingly, upon the break-up of the council, General Wilkinson journeyed south to Natchitoches. From this station he dispatched Colonel Cushing with a message to Cordero, ordering him to remove his troops from the west side of the Sabine River, to the east.

Sergeant Karet had been with Cushing's party and when the message was delivered, the Spanish authorities informed Cordero that Wilkinson could proceed to the Sabine to settle the boundary be-

tween the two nations. However, by the time the message was delivered to General Wilkinson other more pressing matters were demanding his attention and the boundary settlement was temporarily abandoned.

With the return of Colonel Cushing to Natchitoches, Sergeant Karet had been dispatched to his old post at Spanish Town. Life at his post was now uneventful and calm. Ocase Mataha, the capture of whom was now his most pressing duty, was out of the settlement and the gallant soldier had nothing but his thoughts to occupy his over-abundant leisure.

Now those thoughts of late had been anything but pleasant. Again and again during the past weeks they had returned to the lovely girl he had seen in the Dolette Hills. It had been a shock and a grief to learn that Sabine was the wife of the half-breed whom it had become his duty to capture and punish, but a greater torture had become his when, just before he had joined Colonel Cushing, he had learned that Sabine loved his new found friend, Senor Bon Villon.

This morning, as he toyed with his coffee cup, the sergeant's mind went back to the day in mid-August when he and Marcelena Sepulvedor had been riding together through the woods near the San Miguel. As they rested their horses in the shade of a thicket beside the old Spanish Trail they had

been surprised to see Senor Bon Villon and Sabine ride silently down the road. Startled, he and Marcelena had prepared to announce their presence in glad greeting when the attitude of the newcomers had frozen the words on their tongues; the caballero was holding the hand of the beautiful Sabine and bending upon her the most ardent looks of love. Neither he nor Marcelena could break in upon that attitude and look. Consequently, the lovers had ridden past unaware they had been seen.

Again and again that scene had arisen to torment Karet. In sleepless hours of the night his anguished mind had recreated the pleased, excited look on the face of Sabine as Bon Villon talked to her so earnestly and held her hand so closely. It rose before him now in all its torturing clearness. Try as he would he could not shake off the depressing thoughts nor the pain they caused him.

Seeing him lost in abstraction and more than half captivated by his careless love-making, Petra left her place behind the bar and came toward his table. She stopped before him, one plump hand on her curving hip, her brown hair curled coquetishly, limpid eyes fixed upon him. Chafing at his long neglect, her words had the sting that comes naturally to a disappointed *cher-amie,* "Faith, am I, then, so hateful to the eyes that monsieur dreads the sight of me, or is old age overtaking our gay deceiver?"

"Ah, my *petite* Petra, are you here?"

He reached for her and pulled her to his lap where she sat in pleased, pouting prettiness. When Smith waddled into the room and found them thus he chuckled deep in his round stomach that the morose sergeant was at last coming out of his grouch. But these cheap amours had lost their savor for the Frenchman and he soon shook off the too willingly given caresses of the barmaid and wandered out of the tavern and about the barricade, growing gloomier as the sun mounted higher and higher in the cloudless sky.

"*Sacre bleu!*" he said, wiping his perspiring face while the sun shimmered down in hot still waves on the green face of the earth and the quiet little fort. "This feeling is getting the best of me, I'll ride."

And ride he did as soon as his horse was saddled. He would accept the invitation Senor Bon Villon had extended him and pass a day or two at his friend's home. This happy thought pleased him and giving his horse the reins he surrendered himself to thoughts of the lovely and unattainable Sabine.

As he plunged deeper into the Bayou Scie swamp the silent brooding shadows fell back to give place to the golden haired image that floated ahead with a beaconing look in its blue eyes. When he emerged from the swamp a while later, the afternoon sun hung low over the hills in a sweltering gold. Left

to itself, the horse turned off at the first bypath and continued on through the woods. Presently the horse stopped, and looking up, Karet was astonished to find himself before the home of the woman about whom he had been so intently thinking. In the doorway of the hut stood Sabine herself like a golden buttercup within a wooden frame. He could only stare, divided between dream and reality.

Sabine's heart fluttered like a captured bird as he rode boldly up to her door. Surprise mingled with a strange, thrilled feeling swept over her and made stars of her unbelieving eyes. She was alarmed at the recklessness of this audacious Frenchman. Could it be that he had come thus openly to capture Ocase single handed? What foolishness, with the Indian at most only a mile or two away, for Ocase had come in during the night and left both his horses in the lot this morning. She must get rid of her caller at once, and without waiting a moment, she stepped back and closed the cabin door just as Karet was dismounting from his horse. He threw the reins over the saddle horn and started for the cabin but stopped dead in his tracks as he looked up and was struck full in the face by the closed door.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed angrily, his hopes of crimson romance dying almost at their birth and his vanity as a heart-breaker receiving its death blow.

While he stood looking at the cabin in a state of puzzled indecision Sabine was watching him uneasily through a crack. A feeling of pity possessed her and shame for the discourtesy of her act, but she was shrewd enough to see his keen disappointment, and woman enough to enjoy it. Ah—! She gasped, incredulous—, panicky as she saw him toss his handsome brown head proudly and march determinedly toward the house. At his loud knock she stood still, hoping he would go away but a second and louder knock galvanized her into impatient anger. She would open that door and send him about his business; she would snap her fingers at this fine sergeant with his bold ways coming to the very door of the Indian who was perhaps this very minute watching him from the cover of the woods. She unlatched the door and, furious, looked straight at the Frenchman. She'd teach this bold madman. But the passion of anger he had aroused suddenly left her cold and weak with the thought of his great danger. Ocase—

At sight of her he seemed stricken dumb. He was standing nearer her now and she saw his tender, sunny brown eyes devouring her with hungry adoration, and her cold little heart swelled and felt like bursting in her breast. They looked into each others eyes and time ticked an epoch in their lives during the space their glances met and clung. Sabine gathered her thoughts from the chaos into

which the sight of him had thrown her and tried to make her trembling voice stern.

"Monsieur, your audacity is only surpassed by your foolishness in daring to come here. This is Chief Ocase's home and I, his wife, wish you to go away at once. Ocase has only stepped into the woods and is likely to return any moment. So please, please go!"

The officer did not move but continued to feast his eyes on her golden beauty as if he had not heard what she said. Sabine's face flushed at the open admiration of his look.

"Will you go, monsieur? For the love of God, go! I am frantic because you will not realize your danger."

"But, madame, I have just arrived!"

"If you do not leave at once I shall leave the house the back way for I cannot bear to see you murdered."

He saw that her blue eyes were swimming in tears and this moved him as nothing else could.

"I will go, *petite madame*. I can not bear to have you in tears but I should enjoy meeting your husband immensely. Your wish shall be my law today. There will be another time and place where I shall make the acquaintance of Chief Ocase. I have been permitted to look upon your lovely face and that is much, much more than I had hoped for. Would madame kindly direct me to the home of Senor Bon

Villon? I had started to see him and fortunately took the wrong trail. I trust madame's sense of direction will prove surer today than at our last meeting!"

His merry eyes laughed down on her with a look that kept the warm blood pounding in her veins long afterward, but now her only thought was to hurry him away. She pointed the way down the path that led to Bon Villon's home and when he caught the white little hand and printed a hot kiss on its palm, the ice melted in her face and little gleams of wonder and pain crept over it. Her eyes swept the unruly brown hair and her soft palm felt the warmth of his lips. He looked at her for a moment as if to get her every feature photographed on his memory. With a low bow he then unhurriedly walked to his horse, mounted and rode away. But before the woods closed in on him, he turned, and was filled with a great rapture to find her still standing in the door. On impulse he swept the soft hat from his head and kissed his hand to her.

Gone now was the gloom of the day for Karet. It had melted into a thing of joy. He rode swiftly, the beaming mid-afternoon sun throwing patterns of light and shade over him as it slanted through the trees and lengthened the shadows across the little path that led over the Dolette Hills.

Dieu, he was trying to live in a fool's paradise. He was a fool, a great fool. She was the Indian's

lawful wife and more than that, in love with the handsome Bon Villon. Yes—he was just an imbecile Frenchman. And yet—her look had meant something—what had her eyes said to him in that one breath-taking moment. Surely she had never looked at Senor Bon Villon like that. But,—damnation! She was so sweet, so adorably white and sweet.

In this frame of mind he rode up the path to the senor's little home just as the red sun flared sinking behind the hills.

From the shade of his gallery, Bon Villon, somewhat surprised, watched the Sergeant as his horse came swiftly down the path to his gate. His hot blood pounded for a moment—this was the man who had stolen Marcelena from him. Then he was down the steps striding along to meet his visitor and genuinely glad to see him.

"*Buenos noches,* sergeant, this is a real surprise." He said greeting Karet as he dismounted at the gate.

"*Mil gracias* for inviting me, senor," the soldier answered. "The general's orders to march to Sabine River were recalled so I picked this time to find out where you live."

"*Bueno,* I am glad. This has been a miserably hot day in the hills. You are just in time for coffee."

Karet looking about saw that Bon Villon lived simply. His house consisted of two large rooms with a kitchen on the back. The place was shel-

tered in the midst of hills except on the east side where there was a little valley along the course of the Dolette Bayou, a hustling, singing stream within thirty feet of the house.

While the sergeant admired the natural beauty of the place, he could hear Mulatto at the woodpile chopping, and Liza humming as she ground coffee in the kitchen. He watched the sinking sun kiss goodbye to the hills in a last golden glow and somehow felt a soothing peace steal over him.

"I see you like my hills, sergeant. So do I, especially in the Fall."

Liza appeared with a tray of black coffee.

"This is Liza, Sergeant Karet, my new maid of all work and this is Mulatto, groom, butler and general manager of the Bon Villon establishment."

Liza was smiling and Mulatto grinning, hat in hand, at the end of the gallery. Both were impressed with the importance of the occasion.

"Attend to Monsieur Karet's horse, Mulatto."

"Yas-suh, yas-suh, sho! I'se seed Marse K'ret befo! I 'lows you'll stay a right smart while wid us, Marse K'ret?"

"May do that, Mulatto, I like the Dolette Hills."

"Sho' glad ter hear dat. I run er long an give yo' hoss er bait er cawn. Jus' guv Midnight a whole passel." And he grinned himself out and away to the lot.

"Now, Liza," said her master as she came for the

coffee cups. "Put the big pot in the little pot while Monsieur Karet is here."

"Sho', Marse Villon, I'se gwine ter change de diet on dis place. Lawd, lemme in dat kitchen."

The two men sat talking, each looking at the other through the eyes of the woman he loved and seeing in him the qualities that had won a love where he had failed. They liked each other in spite of their rivalry. Supper over, they returned to the dark gallery and resumed their conversation. The moon rose and wove fantastic patterns over the little yard and house. Mulatto came often with wine and cigars and the two friends talked of everything but the subject closest to their hearts. The moon sailed under a cloud and the glow of their cigars made the only light.

Karet had been thinking constantly of Bon Villon and Sabine. He longed to confess that he had witnessed their litle love scene in the San Miguel woods but he was not sure how this hot headed Spaniard would receive this revelation. Now, during a pause in their conversation, with the silence of the hills all about him, he grew more and more silent. To his impulsive nature, concealment was a torture. He was accepting Bon Villon's hospitality and harboring hot jealousy for him at the same time.

"Damnation!" he whispered louder than he

should and Bon Villon's cigar ceased to function at the sound.

"How was that, are you annoyed at something, sergeant?"

"*Dios, senor,* did I speak aloud or are you a mind-reader?"

"Both, sergeant. What's on your mind??"

"Thanks, senor, but I was not intending to mention this matter to you." He groped about in his mind for words to express his thoughts without giving offense to his friend.

"It is not my wish to presume on your confidence, sergeant, but possibly I might help you straighten out this matter that is worrying you."

The Frenchman thought to himself, "Indeed you can—if you will." Aloud he said, "It is I who would be presuming. *Mon Dieu! Senor,* I would not offend you for my life and this matter is very personal."

"Fire away, sergeant. I have ceased to take offense. Louisiana has cured me of that."

Karet cleared his throat nervously. Bon Villon wondered uneasily what the impulsive Frenchman would divulge. Would he ask advice about his love for Marcelena? Black jealousy of the soldier swept him and his dark, handsome features were set in a deadly calm while he waited in the silence, his heart growing cold at the bleak outlook on life that would be his when he knew for certain that Marcelena

loved another. Despite her coldness and hostility the last time he had seen her on the Bayou San Miguel, hope had not died when he walked away from the little pool. Would the soldier take away even that hope, that slender thread that had sustained him in the days that had followed?

"I hope you will believe me, senor," began Karet in a hesitant, constrained voice, "when I swear that I have tried to overcome this mad spell that is on me. I know it is hopeless in every way—but in spite of it all I must face the facts and confess that I, too, am madly in love with the beautiful wife of the Indian, Ocase."

Bon Villon's jaws gripped as for a blow, fell apart in the friendly dark. Sabine and not Marcelena!

"What are you driving at, sergeant? Please explain. You surely do not accuse me of being in love with Sabine?"

"*Mon Dieu,* senor, but is it not so?"

"Why—I in love with Sabine? I am astounded. Where did you get that notion?"

The Spaniard's voice sounded gruff but it was the gruffness of sudden joy. The hurt, uncomprehending, hopeless feeling that had raged in his jealous heart for the past few days had vanished, and joy unlimited swept over him as he thought his gray eyed love might still be his.

"I know it is none of my affair, senor, but I am enjoying your charming hospitality and I think it

best for us thoroughly to understand each other. I wish you to know that the Senorita Marcelena and myself were sitting at the side of the road last week when you and Madame Sabine rode by. You were holding madame's hand and talking earnestly. Naturally we drew conclusions."

Bon Villon drew a long breath. Marcelena had seen him examining Sabine's ring and has jumped to the hasty opinion that he had been unfaithful. So that was what lay behind her unusual beaviour at the Bayou San Miguel. His heart leaped for relief and new life seemed to race thruogh his veins.

"So, that is how it was—you and Senorita Marcelena concluded then and there that I was declaring my love for Sabine?" And the stern, self-contained Spaniard roared with laughter to the great astonishment of Karet. The ringing gladness of it, however, gave hope to the depressed Frenchman and he leaned forward.

"What else were we to think? We saw you—"

"Why, my dear sergeant, I could no more love Sabine than I could a sister. That is the way I feel toward her—like a brother. I am glad you have told me this and I will explain to you—"

"That is enough, senor. You need not explain anything."

"But I wish to."

And Bon Villon, his heart inexpressibly light, told the soldier about the ring and, happy himself, he

was glad to relieve the poor fellow's mind, even as his own had been relieved, though deep concern swept over him as he realized how madly infatuated Monsieur Karet really was with Sabine. Knowing the vicious Ocase and what it meant to him to possess a beautiful white wife, he felt cold shivers run up his spine at what the outcome of this might be. Tactfully, he tried to warn his friend Karet, but his words failed to elicit a reply from the Frenchman who merely smoked harder and said less. This silent mood sat strangely on the volatile Karet: peace had stolen over his hot restless heart. He sat contented, listening to the ever present murmer of the little bayou as it sang its way through the night, disturbed at intervals by the deep bassoing of bull frogs rejoicing in the prospect of coming rain.

Conversation between the two men on the little gallery waned and died. Each was busy with pleasant thoughts quite different from his feeling earlier in the evening. Not long afterwards they retired. Bon Villon, happier than he had been in many days, surrendered himself to pleasant thoughts and was soon asleep. Karet, however, lay still in wide-eyed wakefulness for hours before drifting into troubled sleep that brought only horrible dreams: Sabine, in all her exquisite loveliness stood by the little bayou that sang in his ears, a cruel faced savage crept stealthily up behind her, a struggle, a raised hunting knife, a splash of blood and she lay with her face

cold and white in the moonlight; the savage turned, it was the dark cruel face of the half-breed. The senor's dog growled deep and ugly, rattling his chain. The noise awakened Karet; he opened his eyes to find the moon peeping through the little window from behind a cloud. He lay back again but sleep would not come. He lit a cigarette and slipped out onto the gallery where he stood leaning against one of the posts, his sombre eyes fixed on the dark shadows beyond the bayou. His dream had been so real that he jumped as a stick cracked in the yard, and a bird fluttered in the vines at Bon Villon's window. He stepped softly in his bare feet to the edge of the gallery and stood aghast at the sight that met his eyes.

Under his host's window four men were creeping along the ground on their hands and knees. He could see them plainly in the moonlight. One arose and, stooping over, peered into the Spaniard's room. He pushed aside the vines and, assisted by the other three, prepared to climb in. Karet's first thought was to rush out on them but one against four and unarmed would avail nothing. If he shouted it would only hurry them to act. His mind worked like lightning. He would dash into the house— Then he heard the low growl of a dog and remembered that they had forgotten to unchain the big wolf hound at the steps, and it was the dog's restless growls that had disturbed his dreams. In a flash

Karet had leaped over the gallery, unchained the great dog and sent him flying to his master's rescue. The animal launched himself on the villain at the window who had just worked his way through the honeysuckle and was half way in. At the dog's charge the men supporting the one climbing in the window turned loose and let him fall thudding to the ground. There was a terrible growl and a strangled scream for help. Karet, calling loudly to Bon Villon, dashed into the house for his pistols. He was out again in an instant but the attackers save the one at whose heels the wolf hound had on his back as it teased and twisted at his neck with increasing fury, were out of sight and hearing. The Frenchman tried to call off the animal, but it was the firm voice of his master, "Off! Tiger, let go!" that caused the dog, his neck wet with the blood of his victim, to release the captive.

Bon Villon called to the quivering Mulatto and the three carried the unconscious man to the gallery and laid him down. He was not dead but badly wounded about the shoulders and neck. They washed and bound up his wounds and tried to revive him sufficiently to make him talk, but he was either unconscious from fright or pretending to be, so they failed to get a word from him. Mulatto was so frightened that Bon Villon sent him back to bed.

Sergeant Karet explained how he had managed to foil the attack. The man on the floor remained

in a dazed, unconscious state and was still so when they left him tied securely to a post and Tiger unchained in the yard. They fastened the doors and windows and returned to their beds. This time the soldier slept and Bon Villon lay awake thinking. He would keep the damned assassin until he *did* talk. There was more than one way to make him; but next morning the captive was gone—Old Tiger lay in the yard dead. He had been caught with a lasso and choked to death.

XIV.

For the next few days after the attempted entry of Bon Villon's home Sergeant Karet remained at the house in the Dolette Hills as the guest of the Spaniard. The days passed quietly and uneventfully. There was hunting and fishing in the morning, conversation and the reading of old gazettes in the evening. Tiring of these, the two men often took down their swords and practiced fencing. The tall, lithe Spaniard taught the soldier *carte* and *tierce* in the shade of the great spreading oaks, with the green grass and the blue sky for their fencing parlor.

During those days Karet was strongly tempted to urge the Senor Bon Villon to tell of this secret enemy who persecuted him so persistently, but here he seemed always to meet a stone wall of reticence he could not scale. The visit passed without any revelation from his host and without any renewed activity from the enemy.

On the third morning Sergeant Karet decided to return to the fort to see if new orders from his general had arrived. In the back of his mind was the

thought of returning by the path over which he had come with the possibility of again seeing Madame Sabine.

As he rode away from Bon Villon's home along the path he had travelled only three days before, Karet felt a sense of depression at leaving his friend alone in the trackless hills at the mercy of the bold ruffians he had encountered during his short visit. The woods were very dense about the little house and men could hide in perfect safety right to the senor's very door. Though there had been no new move in the preceding three days it might very well be that his host's enemies were waiting for the departure of his friend before again attacking Bon Villon. The soldier rode slowly along the path, ill at ease, and wishing that he had remained a day longer with the Spaniard. An owl hooted in the thick branches and made him start nervously. Angry at himself, he stopped his horse, searched out the owl on a limb and shot him. The bird clung to the limb with one foot, then fell to the ground at the side of the path.

"The devil!" said Karet to himself. "I'm a fool today."

He rammed another load into his pistol and continued on his way unconscious of the fact that Ocase Mataha's evil malevolent eyes had watched him kill the owl and followed him out of sight before resuming his noiseless way through the woods.

Riding along slowly, Karet pondered various excuses that might admit him to the home of the bandit he loathed and intended to capture. Was it possible that it had been only three days since he had seen her? Then, he had been tormented with the certainty that Bon Villon was her lover. Poof, —that had been imagination. How silly of him to jump at conclusions. The way was now clear for him. But was it? There was yet her husband. He cringed at the thought of that odious half-breed, reeking with crime and bloody deeds. Bon Villon had told him in detail of the circumstances of Sabine's entanglement with the Indian. He knew also that she felt herself bound forever by the vows she had made, and all at once seemed as far away and unattainable as she had ever been.

A woman's frightened scream shattered the quiet of the woods. It disrupted the sergeant's thoughts. He listened—Again it pierced the silence. A scream of fear and pain. That voice—

"God!" Karet breathed almost as a prayer, and putting spurs to his horse, dashed down the path in the direction of the Indian's cabin.

Torn and bruised from low hanging limbs, he reached the clearing about the cabin and was horrified to see Sabine struggling in the arms of one man, while another twisted and pulled her hand. She saw him as soon as he dashed out of the woods, but so busy were the villians, that he was right upon

them before they knew it. His sword plowed its way through the body of one of them. With a terrific yell he fell to the ground. The other one released Sabine and darted toward a large tree.

Karet rushed after the second assailant, firing as he went, but dodging from tree to tree the fleeing man made good his escape. The sergeant returned to Sabine and found her bending over the prostrate form of the bleeding man, trying to turn him over on his back. She arose as Karet bent over her, begging to know if she was hurt. When he saw her little bruised hand, he started to run the man through a second time but she caught his arm.

"No, sergeant, don't. He is dying. See, he scarcely breathes. Turn him over and I will get some water."

She ran into the house for a cup of water which the man drank slowly in painful gulps. He opened his eyes and Karet saw he was conscious, though dying fast. He bent over him.

"Who are you?"

The white lips moved but no sound came from them.

"Speak, if you would do one good act before you die. Who are you?"

"Jose," came the whisper.

"What did you want here?"

"Ring," he murmured, looking at Sabine.

"Who was with you?"

"A stranger named Bellaco who—"

Karet leaned closer. The lips moved, but only his breath rustled through; again the lips twisted to form the words, "Priest Cingaro,"—and was dead.

Sabine stood up, very pale.

"My ring! What did they want with my ring?" she said more to herself than to Monsieur Karet.

"It is strange," he answeerd, standing close beside her. He wondered if this new problem had any connection with the attack on Bon Villon, but dismissed the idea as absurd.

"Bellaco and the priest Cingaro," he said, turning to Sabine.

"Did he say priest Cingaro? Ah, surely no holy father could be connected with a thing like this."

"Cingaro? That name sounds familiar to me. Ah, I do remember!" His face darkened. "The sanctimonious villian! He is a crippled priest, Sabine, who stays at Smith's tavern." He spoke her name as naturally as he had in his thoughts since first he had learned what it was.

Sabine felt a thrill at the sound of her name on his soft voice. Then she remembered for the first time that Ocase was not far away. He had gone to the cave in the woods where he stored his booty after one of his raids. She was not sure how long he would be away, and knowing that a meeting of her husband and the soldier must end disastrously, she hurriedly thanked the seregant for his timely

help and begged him to leave. Karet, thrilled and satisfied in her presence, protested that it would be really unsafe to leave her. The other villain might return, but Sabine was far more frightened at the thought of Ocase and Karet meeting than at another attack from the man in the woods. She showed him her little pistol, a present from Bon Villon, and Ocase's big bloodhound now chained in the house, to protect her.

Seeing the real distress in her blue eyes Karet consented to go.

"Madame, I shall always take joy in doing what you ask, but promise me you will ride over to Senor Bon Villon's if your husband is late in coming.

Sabine gave him her promise with a soft look that thrilled him.

"Of a truth you are a charming person, monsieur," she said as he bent to kiss her swollen hand. "What a pity that you are a police spy and upon so hopeless a case."

"Hopeless cases are my delight, Madame Blue Eyes, and I shall not fail of my task in the Dolettes."

The firm set of his mouth and the determined look in his eyes gave Sabine a glimpse of the strong character, usually hidden by his gay, flippant manner.

"I fear monsieur is a boaster."

"Ah, I see. Then, naturally, madame, I must prove my words, yes?"

"I would not deign to waste my time trying it if I were you, monsieur," she advised with charming sang froid and a teasing smile in her eyes.

"Madame is kind, but I have said I shall and I will. I go now with the assurance you will keep your promise, so, *bon soir, madame.*"

He bowed low, mounted his horse and rode back down the path. He was if possible, more intrigued with Sabine as a coquette, than he had been with her other cool unapproachable self. A natural philanderer himself, he felt, in the presence of her bright personality and provoking indifference, the same floundering helplessness he had so often caused in others. In the solitude of the woods he was learning to know himself better than he would ever have done in New Orleans or Paris, as silent places are often perfect mirrors for our inner selves. He rode in sight of Senor Bon Villon's house just as the senor was pushing pen and ink aside to seal a large envelope.

Glancing through the window, Bon Villon was surprised to see his late caller returning so soon, but as ever the perfect host he greeted Karet as though he had not seen him for a month. He ordered Mulatto to put up the sergeant's horse. Karet at once with his usual impulsiveness related in detail all that had occurred that morning.

When Karet had finished Bon Villon strode up and down the room, his black eyes flashing. All

his vague suspicions of the past weeks suddenly crystallized. The dead Jose must be the villian who had attempted to kill him near the San Miguel, and at whom Guydo had shot. Sabine's attackers were, in all probability, the same who had attempted to enter his home and been foiled by Karet's timely warning. And they were after Sabine's ring! Evidently he and Sabine were closely connected in the mind of the priest Cingaro, who was of course the moving force behind the series of attacks.

Karet saw that his friend was far more troubled by this attack on Sabine than he had been over his own narrow escape a few nights before. His thoughts turned again to Sabine, the innocent victim of the mysterious intrigue that seemed to center around Bon Villon. He wanted to start at once to trace the intrigue to its source and would have done so, had Bon Villon said the word.

"Sergeant," said the Spaniard, stopping in his walk, "I will have to put a stop to these attacks. As long as it was I alone they were after, I felt I could wait a favorable time, but since they have set upon Sabine, I shall not stop until I catch the damned rascals. But that reminds me, I must not wait for Ocase to go home, he is frequently away for days."

Bon Villon took a large horn from where it hung on the wall and, standing in the window, blew three long, loud blasts that echoed and re-echoed from the hills. Then he stood listening. Almost

instantly the report of a pistol shot came faintly to their ears.

Taking up the long envelope he had sealed so carefully Bon Villon turned to the soldier.

"Monsieur Karet, I am going to ask a favor of you, one that will be of great service to me. I wish you to deliver this packet into the hands of Senorita Marcelena Sepulvedor upon your return to Spanish Town. I hope, however, you will stay here a few days and help me, for I am now fully resolved to unravel this tangled mystery and two heads may be more effective than one."

"Ah, senor, you express my earnest desire now. I will deliver the packet to the senorita in all safety, and take great pleasure in serving you in this singular and mysterious affair which is threatening you. Judging from what that rascal said today, the priest Cingaro will be our staring point. Faugh! I remember his pale woman face and, *Mon Dieu!* the saintly dog shall answer to me for this attack on the beautiful little madame."

"One further favor, sergeant, I shall have to ask of you. My horn is summoning Ocase Mataha who will be here in a few moments. May I ask that you do not arrest or molest him until after we have solved this mystery? The Indian knows the woods hereabouts as no other person, and further more is partially acquainted with the events of my life leading up to the present attacks."

Sergeant Karet hastened to assure his friend that

pending the settlement of the problem before them, he would make no effort to capture the bandit chief. He, too, realized the tremendous help which the Indian's knowledge of the country and his ability at shadowing, would be to them.

"Then, sergeant, will you excuse me for a few moments while I go and confer with Ocase."

Leaving the house, Bon Villon hurried to the old oak which was a prearranged place for their meetings.

"Well, Cap, what's up that you send for me?" the Indian asked in the gutteral voice of his mother's people.

Quickly Bon Villon informed Ocase of the repeated attempts on his own life, and gave a description of the attack on Sabine and the attempted theft of her ring. At the Spaniard's mention of Sergeant Karet and his part in the defense of Sabine, the half-breed's snake-like eyes glittered. He shrugged his shoulders at Bon Villon's warning to guard his wife very closely.

"Don't worry about my squaw, Cap, they're not after her, it's you they want. Send over for my dog, I don't think the rascals will kill him, I'll set my men trailing the priest."

Bon Villon returned to the house while the Indian slouched noiselessly off through the woods.

Resuming their plans the Spaniard and Karet decided to wait for a report from Ocase before making any further move.

XV.

The next day after dinner while Karet and Bon Villon sat in earnest discussion of their plans, they were surprised to see Sabine step out of the woods and come toward the house. She hesitated a moment at sight of Monsieur Karet. The sergeant's heart began to pound, his pulse to throb, he was actually to see her again—to hear her voice—to be near her! He breathed an invocation to the Deity—he wondered how Bon Villon could be so calm, take it as an ordinary occurrence—this visit from *her!* Sabine shook hands with Bon Villon, acknowledged the sergeant's courtly bow, then took her seat on the door-steps.

"I hope I'm not intruding on you gentlemen," she smiled, refusing to sit in the chairs they offered.

"Indeed not! You couldn't have selected a better time, *la nina.*" Bon Villon hastened to assure her.

Monsier Karet politely, if reluctantly, excused himself, picked a Gazette from a table in the house and went out the back way. He seated himself in the shade of a large magnolia on the bank of the bayou, not to read, but to fret and fume at being

exiled from the presence of his adored one. The light in the sky was growing dim as he looked up to see dark thunder heads obscuring the sun. Too well bred to intrude he remained outside, though he longed with all the intensity of his impetuous Gallic nature to be near this woman of his dreams. All his old jealousy of Bon Villon rose to torment him. How could the senor keep from loving such a woman? Ah, and how could she resist such looks and manliness as was the senor's? The thought was agony to him and unable longer to sit, he walked back and forth beneath the trees.

After an age, it seemed to Karet, he saw Sabine and Bon Villon come out of the house and go down the litle path. They stopped a minute to scan the dark, threatening clouds, then walked more hurriedly and disappeared in the woods.

The exciting events of the last few days were beginning to tell on Monsieur Karet as he waited in the increasing darkness, and listened to the distant muttering of thunder. He grew uneasy and decided to go down the path to meet Bon Villon. He hastened into the nearly dark forest where the trees seemed to close in with ever more intricate tangles, the further he went.

A blinding flash of lightning revealed the whole panorama of trees and tangled vines, followed by a peal of thunder, which rolled echoing and re-echoing, through the still woods. A few big drops

of rain splashed through the trees and struck the sergeant in the face, but with a terrible feeling of uneasiness stalking at his side. Sinister shadows of unknown dangers lurched behind trees and hid in the tangle of vines and fallen logs at the side of the lonely trail. So real was this uncanny feeling that at last, when another flash of lightning revealed Bon Villon striding along the path toward him, great beads of sweat burst out on the Frenchman's forehead. He stopped to get his breath while the senor came on, was just ready to hail him, when suddenly there was a whirl and swish through the air, and an illuminating flash of lightning showed Bon Villon struggling in the coils of a rope as two men leaped down the trail and grabbed him. Karet started forward, blinded by the lightning, he stumbled, caught with his hands, and raced on. He reached the spot and threw himself, pounding and beating, upon one of the men. Suddenly, from behind, he was struck a blow on the head that made him stagger, and the earth sank beneath him.

After a while he opened his eyes to find the rain beating in his face and a gruff voice coming out of the storm said, "Well, my fine sergeant, are you coming back to life?"

Karet raised up, but fell back again with the pain in his head.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Chief Ocase Mataha!" the Indian answered, surveying the Frenchman grimly.

"You!" yelled Karet above the roar of the wind and the storm.

"Yes. And a surprising business for you to be lying there knocked in the head."

"The senor, where is Senor Bon Villon? Dog that you are to take the senor and then strike me from behind."

Karet got unsteadily to his feet.

"Ough! You sniveling squaw. I strike no man from behind."

"But where is Bon Villon?" again demanded Karet.

"I guess in his nest by this time."

"*Diable,* no! Did you not see them drag him away?"

The half-breed's cool manner changed at once.

"Why, what's up? Anything wrong with Cap?"

"Wrong! He was roped here like a wild bull. The last I saw of him he was tied and struggling. Then I was struck from behind and that is all I know."

The Indian's face darkened and a knowing look flashed from his black eyes. He dropped to his knees to examine the ground but the rain had washed out all signs of struggle.

"Ough! Not even Wolf could trail them now,"

he grunted rising and shaking the rain from him like a dog.

Sergeant Karet swore he would dive into the forest and stumble upon some sign of the attackers, but the chief shook his head.

"It would do no good. If you wish to help the Cap, go to his house, secure his papers and money, unchain Wolf and wait for me."

Karet looked into the eagle eye of the half-breed and felt he could trust him so far as Bon Villon was concerned.

"When will you come?"

"At day break."

"You will not fail?"

Ocase's eyes flashed angrily at the sergeant but, without deigning a rpely, he turned and strode through the woods.

The gale had passed and white clouds were scudding along the sky. A dull orange light burned in the west where the shrouded sun had passed away and left a rose color through the tree tops and on the carpet of wet pine needles that slushed under the tread of the Indian as he passed out of sight.

Karet, wet and disheartened, made his way through the wind swept woods back to the lonely home of his friend. In less than an hour he had reached the little clearing. A sleepy mocking bird twitted in the vines, and a horned owl gave a loud squall and flapped its wings from an old elm tree.

The house was dark and silent, Mulatto and Liza were no doubt in bed and asleep. Happy negroes, thought Karet, so easily made happy; Christians every one of them, from the octoroon to the full blooded African, naturally trustful and easy to convince and convert. Destitute of inventive germs or creative inspirations, they were copyists and followers of beaten paths.

Wolf, at the approach of the sergeant, growled coarse and ugly. Rearing against his chains, he resembled a tall hairy man in the starlight. Scenting the air he gave a glad yelp of recognition as the Frenchman came up.

"Good fellow, fine dog," he said, stooping to unbuckle the collar setting the dog free to guard his master's property.

Karet then knocked loudly at the door to arouse the sleeping negroes, whose sonorous breathing he could hear coming from the loft, but they were hard to awaken. He knocked again, louder, then shook the door till it rattled on its hinges. At this the slumbering servants woke and their stercorations ceased.

"Who dat?" came a voice from the loft.

"It is I, Mulatto. Let me in."

"Who is I? We's got to know who dat is rummagin' roun dis time er night."

"You damned fool! Open this door quick, do you hear?"

"Lord! Dat's Marse K'ret. I nevber s'picioned it was you. Yas suh, I'se comin!" He was down in a minute and had the door opened. "Sho! didn't know twas you, Marse K'ret. Wait, honey, whilst I blow up dese coals."

Sergeant Karet stood in the dark room while Mulatto piled on lightwood and splinters that soon made a blazing fire. A cheerful sight it was on this wet night.

"Mercy, honey, you'se wet ez er rat. Dat's zackly why I mistook your voice, hits wet too," grinned Mulatto and scratched his wooly head, yawning sleepily. "Whar Marse Villon at?"

"I don't know, Mulatto."

"Can't say when he's likely ter drap home?"

"No, I cannot. I fear he is in great danger from the same devils who were after him the other night." Then he explained to the scared negro what had happened.

"My Lawd, Marse K'ret! Oh, Lawdy, Liza, I knowed dey wuz sot agin him. Liza, cum down fum dat loft and get on yer knees and ax de good Lawd to 'liver my pore chile frum de hands uv de Philistines."

Here he broke down, blubbering and moaning as he prayed aloud. Liza came down with white, rolling eyes and joined in the lamentations.

Karet sat regarding the negroes pityingly. He

could give them very little consolation about their master or find any for himself.

"Come, Mulatto, you and Liza, your master will get through all right. If you wish to help him, get up."

They rose, their eyes red with weeping.

"Show me where your master keeps his papers" said Karet rising.

Mulatto pointed out a cabinet of numerous drawers. The sergeant explored the cabinet thoroughly and took out all the papers and gold coin he found. These he made into a package which he locked in a metal box and hid in a hollow tree down by the bayou. Returning to the house, he sent the negroes back to bed and sat by the fire thinking. The more he pondered the worse matters looked, and he decided to forego all idea of arresting Ocase until Bon Villon was found. No one knew this wild country as did the Indian who looked as though he would tear up the earth for the "Cap."

Burdened with anxiety about his friend, Sergeant Karet sat for hours before the fire, his mind going back to the attack and dwelling upon possible solutions of the mystery. The fire died out, his head drooped and he was asleep.

Mulatto's voice roused him and he looked out at the dawn of another day. Liza had breakfast ready and the horses were at the door, awaiting the arrival of the outlaw chief.

XVI.

Monsieur Karet ate his breakfast hurriedly by candlelight, then began to pace the floor, heels thumping and spurs jingling to his quick, nervous steps. Pausing often to glance through the open door, he saw the morning star, *avant-coureur* of the greater sun and herald of his near approach, wane then disappear, and still the Indian did not come. The sergeant was in an ugly mood for one of his easy disposition. He was regretting that he had made no effort to locate the senor the night before as he had wished to do, and for trusting all to the wily half-breed.

"Hell and damnation!" he swore in dusgust at himself, as stamping out of the house he walked rapidly to the bank of the little bayou where he continued to pace back and forth like a hungry panther.

Mulatto watched the sergeant's rising anger with rolling white eyes.

"Dat solger sho' is spilin' fer er fight. Guess I bettah go long ter de crib an finish shuckin' dat cawn."

Karet paused in his tirade to watch some sportive

top-waters as they played around the mossy green cypress knees in the blue water of the bayou. A large trout flapped to the surface, scattering the fantastic shadows mirrored there by the morning light which fell through the long Spanish moss hanging from the trees overhead.

"Scoundrel, rascal, what the hell's keeping him?"

The fish scudded down out of sight at the noise on the bank and Karet looked up straight into the cold, black eyes of the Indian.

"Ough! The scoundrel is here, monsieur."

"You heard what I said and I consider no explanation necessary," the sergeant answered, looking the half-breed in the eye, his own now dark and flashing.

Above all things on earth Ocase admired bravery the most.

"Damn what you think of me. It's the Cap I'm worried about, we can settle our affairs later."

The Indian's words were low but distinct. He was cold blooded and more patient than the impulsive Frenchman, and could wait his time. Monsieur Karet turned pale in spite of his effort at self control.

"You are right about that, the senor first, then—"

Ocase looked at him with contempt. In his mind he was just an insignificant Frenchman, useful today, tomorrow, ough!—

"I am ready to start. What is your plan?"

"I have sent carriers all over the country and dispatched two of my men to the landing at Natchitoches to halt the priest's escape there."

Ocase's interest was quickening. He loved a man hunt. Though his harsh gutteral voice did not change his eyes were snapping.

"That seems a good start," Karet answered, looking less viciously at the Indian. "But explain what we are to do and let us get at it."

"Huh, no time to explain. Let's ride."

Ocase turned abruptly and gave a shrill whistle which was answered by Lebo and Lebat who dashed out of the woods on their horses, leading Antoine for Ocase. Karet lost no time in securing his horse from where it had stood since day light and dashed off to overtake the three riding ahead. The plight of his friend had swept things out of his hands for the time being, and, though it was galling to his pride as a man as well as a sergeant in the United States army with orders from the governor to capture these very men. He had to submit to circumstances now, for these men were more valuable in this search than all the soldiers at the fort.

At Ocase's orders the whole country was being scoured. From Bayou Pierre to San Patrecio and the San Miguel, the settlers were aroused and joining in the hunt. All day long they searched through swamps, over hills and in all the out of way places

known to the gang. Monsieur Karet acted as one of them, and skirmished with more persistance if not with as much power of endurance as they, thereby winning their respect at least. Late in the evening of the first day they rode into Spanish Town and dismounted at the tavern.

As he walked into the barroom, Fellisse spied him from her place behind the bar. She grew rosy with pleasure at his return and her chubby hands trembled as she poured the drink he ordered.

"Monsieur has been away a long time, travelling constantly, and is *tres fatigue*, yes?"

Her words were spoken sweetly while coupled with arch glances as she handed him another drink.

"*Viola!* Sergeant, are you ill?"

"*Non, ma fille,* I am distracted with fear and uneasiness for my friend, Senor Bon Villon."

"*Oui, oui,* I have heard of his mysteriou disappearance. He was so handsome. It is terrible."

She watched Karet closely, hoping for some sign of jealousy, but she was disappointed. He had already forgotten her existence in anxiety and plans for the search next day.

Soon after he had dined he went off to his room, and early next morning rejoined the others in the woods. They were all present save Slim, whom the chief had sent to the Bayou Pierre settlement several days before, and Handsome Bill, one of Ocase's favorites. Neither Slim nor Handsome had put in

an appearance this morning. This had put the Indian in a dark humor, and his men felt relieved when he sent them in different directions before he himself rode away with Lebo. They had learned to keep their distance when the swarthy face of the Indian looked as it did this morning.

Monsieur Karet and his party skirted the Dolette Hills until they came to a trail leading from Bayou Pierre across the Chama Bayou, a very boggy stream with cypress trees and their knees growing thickly along its edges. The adjacent land, composed entirely of cane and cypress brake, was low and swampy. Karet wondered at the vast number of turtles to be seen on every fallen log and stump in the mud and water. The sun poured fire on the steaming swamp, and aligators and snakes basked their scaly hides in its hot rays. The horses sloshed slowly along in the mud, spattering their riders until finally emerging on the hills, they made their way at a faster gait than the bottoms and canebrakes would permit. Keen eyes pierced through thick woods and down hills. At last one of the men called the sergeant 's attention to some vultures sitting on the limbs of a dead tree just ahead.

Karet looked in the direction indicated and saw some of the repulsive birds perched on the tree, while others congregated around something on the ground. The carcas of some wild animal was Joe Sohone's comment. The men drew near and the

vultures rose, circling overhead, impatient to finish their feast, balancing in the air and craning their rusty, wrinkled necks at the intruders.

Joe rode up slightly ahead of the others but stopped suddenly and gasped at the sight that met his eyes. The others advanced and Karet peered around to see what made them stare so.

"Holy saints!" he whispered, and sat still for a long moment, staring in speechless horror.

"Get down, sergeant, you saw the senor last, and see if this looks like him," said Joe Sohone.

Karet, dismounting slowly, advanced to the body. The face had been eaten off and only the bare, bloody bones were left. Lipless teeth shone as though in a horrible grin and clotted locks of black hair hung to the slick, white skull. Could this ever have been the proud, handsome Bon Villon? The body as yet was unmolested and the clothes those the Spaniard had worn the day he was captured. His gold seal ring was on the left hand where he had always worn it.

Karet turned and went back to his horse. The men lifted the body carefully, covered it with a saddle blanket and strapped tightly one one of the horses.

"Be gentle, boys," choked Sergeant Karet, his head bowed on his saddle. Until now he had never realized how near like a brother the brave, kind hearted Bon Villon had become to him. To be

thrown together in this wild country so full of danger to them both, yet with greater promise of happiness than all civilization could offer, had cemented their friendship more closely in this short time than years would have done under different circumstances.

As the party started on the twenty mile ride over hills and swamps to Spanish Town there was not a murmur from the rough men. They wondered what their chief would do when he saw the corpse and the perpetrators of the crime not at hand on whom he could vent his revenge.

Karet sent messengers for Marcel Desoto, the magistrate, and for Father Pavie. He was going to see that his friend was buried in a manner due him. At a late hour they rode into Spanish Town where the other searching parties were waiting to hear the outcome of the days search. Chief Ocase was the first to see them and learn the news but was not satisfied until he had examined the gruesome remains. After being thoroughly convinced that the priest had accomplished his purpose at last, he rose and pulled his large slouch hat farther over his face. The black eyes gleamed in his swarthy face and without a word he strode away into the woods.

All the fort was aroused over the foul murder of Senor Bon Villon, who had grown to be a familiar figure in Spanish Town. Men of all classes whom he would never have dreamed of as friends, came

to show that they were such and to pay their last respects. The magistrate, accompanied by good Father Pavie, arrived and entered into the formality of an inquest at which he identified the body by the ring before turning it over to the friends of the deceased.

Sabine was there and, at their earnest pleadings to be present at Marse Villon's funeral, had brought Mulatto and Liza with her. Karet's heart ached for the beautiful, weeping girl and he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her, but not even he could understand what a loss this death was to her.

To the funeral also came Marcelena Sepulvedor and her brother Guydo. Present ostensibly as a token of respect for the man who had saved her from a panther, she hid behind her set white face a heart that beat with suffocating anguish. Bon Villon had won her love. Her every heart-beat had been for him. That last meeting—Oh, God—if only she could bring back that day! Thoughts of it were driving her mad! What a dreary thing was life! Pride alone, kept her dark lovely face calm and still and sad.

Seeing her among the friends gathered to honor the dead, Sergeant Karet went to her and, in a whisper, told her of Bon Villon's last request of him, and delivered to her the letter. With trembling fingers Marcelena received it and tucked it inside her dress.

Just in the moment before the crowd left for the

burying ground a stooped old woman slid down from a small pony and hobbled into the inn.

"The witch! The old witch of Bayou Pierre!" ran the whisper as the shrivelled Madame Lisso hobbled across the floor toward the coffin. Some of the gathering moved away from her as she passed them muttering, "Ough, ouch, me pore chile. An I must see him, *oui, oui.* To think I should live to see this!"

Sergeant Karet stepped forward and advised her not to look into the coffin.

"I must see him, I will see him wid me pore ole eyes. I must see him, *oui, oui.*"

Pushing by the sergeant she crept close to the coffin. Catching hold of the lid she pulled it back. Sabine moaned and covered her eyes, while Karet turned and walked to the door. Madame Lisso fumbled around the corpse, mumbling all the time, until, finally satisfied, she replaced the lid and hobbled back to her granddaughter's side as the screws tightened and the coffin was carried out. Behind it filed the group of mourners.

Only Sabine, Madame Lisso and Sergeant Karet were left. As the Frenchman turned to close the little procession Madame Lisso put a bleak, skeleton hand upon his arm.

"Wait, me son. I have a word to tell you."

Drawing him a little aside from Sabine she whis-

pered in his ear. Sergeant Karet's features changed from grief to incredulity, then to relief, and joy. In astonishment he gazed into the old woman's face.

"Why, you *are* a witch!" he said in a reverent tone.

Madame Lisso smiled.

"Let tha funeral go on, an atterwards do as I bid ye. Git, now, an lave me wid ma leetle darter."

With a last wondering look Karet bowed to Sabine and her grandmother, then, with a lighter heart than he had known for the preceding forty-hear than he had known for the preceding forty-eight hours, he joined the procession on its way to the cemetery.

XVII.

With a stifled sigh of relief Marcelena at last escaped to the privacy of her room and closed the door behind her. The evening had seemed interminable, and, as she put her candle upon her little desk she felt almost at the end of her strength. To be at the funeral of the man she had loved and forced to maintain a calm, immobile face when her heart was breaking, had been a strain, a strain not lessened when Sergeant Karet had handed her a little packet with the whispered words, "The day before his death Senor Bon Villon asked me to deliver you this." Afterward had come the long ride home with Guydo and the effort to carry on with him an easy, casual conversation.

At home there had been the questions of her father and mother, questions she had to answer in the same carefully impersonal manner, with the same calmness of voice and face. After supper came the usual routine of life with its domestic duties, the long evening in the candlelight, when every moment her heart was longing for solitude that she might be alone with her grief. And

through all those long hours she had been conscious of the packet pressed next the heavy, painful beating of her heart.

Marcelena dropped into the chair before her little desk and with fingers that trembled drew forth the packet and gazed at the superscription: "To Senorita Marcelena Sepulvedor." How like Bon Villon himself were the firm, upright letters of his neat, clear script. She broke the seals and began to read: "*Querida:*

This letter will be delivered to you by our mutual friend, Monsieur Karet Broussard, at his earliest opportunity. I will not try here to tell you, querida, how I love you or how your sweet presence has invaded every thought of my life—all the rest of my days shall be devoted to that. But I think you should know my life as I have lived it before coming to Louisiana. And I take this opportunity to explain certain matters that have put me in a doubtful position.

Senorita, my wild flower of Louisiana, I will say little of my great grand parents. I will state only that they left an only son, my grandfather Philip Estebo, whose profession was the Manufacturer of a steel which gained everywhere a remarkable reputation for is peculiar temper. My grand-father took good advantage of this and early in life accumulated a fortune. At the age of thirty-five his wife died, leaving him a rich, childless widower. He

then married a widowed lady from Madrid, the only daughter of the wealthy nobleman, Don Hedurga. To them were born two sons, the eldest, my father, Don Marcos Estebo, the second, the son of his old age, Don Ricardo Estebo, ten year younger than my father. At the death of his father-in-law, my grandfather inherited the Hedurga fortune and became one of Spain's wealthiest citizens. He lived in the Hedurga castle, a magnificent structure of massive towers, balconied windows and porticoes, furnished with all the elegance that money could procure.

At the death of my grand-father the estate was equally divided between the two brothers. Don Marcos, my father, keen, successful and a natural commercial genius, inherited the industry and financiering traits of his father and, by adding interest after interest to his estate, doubled his fortune in a few years. He was equally successful in the choice of a wife, a sweet French *demoiselle*. There were three children in our happy family, a younger brother Benito, myself, and little Juanita our baby sister, the pet and darling of the family.

My uncle, Don Ricardo, was the exact opposite of my father. He was cruel, revengeful, and had a most vindictive disposition. I remember as a child to have felt in his presence the stifling darkness of a black room. My uncle hated us even as children,

and we were ever on the watch for fear he would invent some new trick or cruelty to practice on us. My father's example and advice was disregarded by his young brother whose entire lack of self respect and depravity of disposition gave him much worry and anxiety. Regardless of this Ricardo plunged into vices of all kinds, and with gambling, drunkenness and fast horses, his great wealth was soon gone, leaving him comparatively poor at the early age of twenty-five. Then there occurred angry scenes between him and my father when he demanded money to settle his heavy debts. These demands were met many times only to be squandered, until in time, the kindness of my father was so outraged by his low, worthless brother that he refused to help him more, and there came a final break.

The scene was a violent one. Don Ricardo, with distorted, angry face and gleaming eyes, would have murdered my father if he had not been forstalled by a blow that felled him and fractured his leg against my father's writing desk. Ricardo was afterwards carried to his apartments and there confined several months. Don Marcos, who sadly deplored the circumstance, nursed and cared for him.

Don Ricardo recovered but had a permanently crippled leg. He heaped curses upon my father, Don Marcos, and swore to be revenged upon him and all his family. My uncle disappeared suddenly and it was more than a year before my father

learned, greatly to his astonishment, that he had become a priest in the Catholic church.

After the death of my mother Don Marcos decided to travel. Leaving his children and business in good hands, he left Spain for a protracted visit to America, from where he wrote of New Orleans, describing in detail the delightful atmosphere of the city created by it's luxury loving slave-holders. Rich, handsome, and with the best social credentials, he was welcomed everywhere. The ravishing Creole Belles made life so enchanting for him that, for a while, he was seemingly forgetful of his native Spain. He wrote later of trips into the distant settlements, where he hunted and fished with the Indians.

Near one of these Indian villages lived a white settler with his wife and beautiful daughter whom Don Marcos met one day while hunting. Charmed by the haunting eyes and lovely face of the rustic *demoiselle,* he became a frequent viistor at the settler's cabin, and in time the lover of the daughter. Months passed ere he felt the call to return to his home. Back in Spain he seemed happy and contented with us, but all the while was getting his business in shape to return to Louisiana. Finally he felt the time had arrived when I was competent to care for my brother and sister, and he could go back to America. He confided to me alone some of the events of his former trip there, his love for

the settler's daughter, and his hope that he could soon return with her to Spain. I remember how gay and dashing he was as he passed the days of waiting. It was late one evening that he noticed our house-keeper, Amanda in close conversation with a strange man. Her confusion when she found she was observed caused him to wonder, but he thought little of it until the next night when again he saw the stranger and Amanda walk to the gate together, and noticed that the man had a peculiar limp in his gait. Instantly suspicious he questioned Amanda, who weepingly declared the man was a cousin, and father, think he was over ready with his conclusions, relented. The net day, however, he allowed his ship to sail without him.

A few nights later we were aroused by the servants and told that Juanita was ill. Hurrying to her room we found her already in a dying condition. A physician was summoned, but our baby died, the cause of her death a mystery to the physician and to us.

I shall not dwell on the shock and sorrow of her death, but Don Marcos postponed his trip indefinitely. One day several months later, my father and I returning from our office, observed walking ahead of us, a man and woman. The man walked with a peculiar hitch in his gait. Father looked annoyed as he remarked to me, "That is Amanda and the same man she was with the day Juanita died."

I thought nothing of it at the time, but afterwards I was to remember that I had seen the man give Amanda a small package before he left her to limp across the street. That night my brother, Benito, died, and the examination of his stomach revealed a poison of strange, unknown substance. A cup containing some of it was found on the table. Our house-keeper had disappeared.

This terrible experience aged Don Marcos far beyond his years. His air turned gray and he was never again the gay caballero. His clinging to me was pitiful. Ah, my poor father! Bending beneath a load of grief and anxiety that I too would be carried off to fill another grave. Through it all, however, he never once gave up his intended voyage to America, and as soon as possible after Benito's death, we began preparations to be off. Huge business interests were disposed of. Our transactions were carried on quietly and the money deposited in the banks of England and New York. My father feared the enmity of the church whose ill will he had already incurred by his great wealth and infidelity. Our preparations completed for a secret departure, Don Marcos sat sunning one morning on a side portico when a woman fruit vendor passed. Among her fruits were grapes of which Don Marcos was very fond. Suspicious of everything, we never touched food that had not been examined, but father, for the moment, seemingly forgetful of

danger, purchased a few, ate them, than called me to fetch him a drink of water. When I returned the fatal sickness was on him, and again the physicians labored in vain. My beloved father died soon after he was stricken.

"Ricardo! Ricardo and Amanda have killed me!" was his last frenzied cry. I knew then, that he had all along suspected his brother.

This made me the only living representative of our family with the exception of Ricardo whom I had not seen since I was a child, and who, by his crimes, had laid the Estebo name in the dust. Saint, devil, and unbelievable fact, my father's own brother.

At once I noticed a decided coolness in my friends. They dropped away until father's faithful old attorney seemed the only one left, and it was to him I went to ask the reason.

He took me by the hand and told me in his kindly way that I was looked upon with suspicion as the cause of the deaths in my family.

"The civil authorities are at work on the case as are also the inquisitorial officers. You must leave Spain secretly my boy, as I have just learned you are in danger of arrest at any time.

"I cannot leave in dishonor!" I told him.

"But you must, Bon Villon. I am aware of your efforts to locate Ricardo. I know more about what has happened than you do yourself, but take my ad-

vice and do not let another day find you in Madrid. You are rich, and that is no small consideration. Go before it is too late."

I bade my old friend farewell. I knew the cell of inquisitorial prison where witnesses were not allowed, and once there, forever there, or worse, to totter out in old age, fit only for the grave. "God! if a thing like this should happen to rob me of the power to avenge my murdered family and to clear my name—" I hurried faster and had reached the threshold of my home when I felt a touch on my arms. Wheeling I beheld a lone man standing beside me.

"Are you Captain Bon Villon?" he asked in a strange gutteral voice. I had never seen an American Indian but knew at once that he was one.

"Dare to come nearer and I'll convince you of my identity," I answered as I drew my sword.

"Does Captain Bon Villon take me for an assassin or an officer?"

At this, I looked at him more closely. I saw a stout, dark man with crafty black eyes, a rather thin nose and not badly dressed.

"A half-breed who uses good Spanish," I thought. What can his business be with me?

He seemed to read my thoughts.

"I am your friend, Senor, I have important information for you."

"Speak then." I replied, keeping my sword un-

sheathed and ready for use at his first show of treachery.

"Well, Cap," he replied familiarly. "I accidentally heard that you are about to be arrested. I believe you innocent and came to help you escape the inquisitorial law."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "If you are just playing for time I will run you through."

At this he rose eyes snapping, and spoke in a cool haughty voice.

"I am Chief Ocase Mataha from Louisiana. I came to Madrid to learn something of my father. He was William Augustus Bowles and was once confined in the prison I would save you from. But—" with a shrug he turned as if to leave.

"Am I to be arrested tonight?"

"You are."

"Then I am going to trust you, Chief Ocase, but if you betray me—"

He understood. And in a few minutes I was ready.

"Where do we go?" I asked.

"To the country first, then the nearest seaport."

We started, but on reaching the front entrance to the castle, ran squarely into several officers. I drew my sword to defend myself.

"Seize him! Seize him!" was the cry as they closed in on us. One clutched my arm and I ran him through. I had intended to cut my way out,

but Chief Ocase gave a whoop and began knocking them right and left with sledge hammer blows. Those who escaped his swift attack were too confused by his actions to follow us as the Indian cried, "Run for it, Cap!"

We followed the course of the Mon-Zanoras, hiding by day, traveling by night until we reached the Tagus. There we hired a boat and made our way to Lisbon. Since then I have been in many places. At times I have been hot on the trail of Ricardo, only to have him disappear as if the earth had swallowed him up. It was in New Orleans that I discovered Amanda trailing me, so decided to change my tactics. I am all that stands between Ricardo and the Estebo riches—and he will go where I go. It had been my great desire to visit the scene of my father's happy days in America, so when Chief Ocase proposed that we embark on a fast pirogue for the Bayou Pierre Settlement I came, knowing my enemies would follow. They have, and I look for quick developments, and hope with the help of Ocase to outwit Ricardo this time.

I would not for the world entangle you in the meshes of my danger, dearest senorita, only I wish you to understand one who is devotedly yours forever,

Bon Villon Estebo.

The last page of the letter rustled in her fingers as Marcelena's eyes, black with tragedy, gazed into space—What a fool she'd been. The nobility and gratitude which prompted him to befriend the half-breed, Ocase, had been misconceived as partnership in crime. Yes, despite all that Guydo and Don Leona could say, she had halways felt, deep in her heart, that Bon Villon could not be the low accomplice of the bandit chief. She had thought him the Spanish Gentleman he was, brave, grateful, loving, loyal—loyal—.

That day in the San Miguel Woods she had seen him holding Sabine's hand and talking earnestly to her. Now, with the letter before her, the scales of jealousy fell from her eyes. What she had interpreted as love-making was undoubtely but some effort on Bon Villon's part to advise Sabine in her misfortune; to aid her in her great trial as he had aided the Indian Chief, out of gratitude for his help in his escape from Spain. Yes, she realized now she had been hasty, worse, she had been cruel that day he had come to her at the bayou—Yes cruel and unjust for she had not explained, nor had she given the senor opportunity to know why she had acted so unjustly.

And he had thought that his friendship with Ocase lay behind her cruelty. On the day before he was murdered, with almost his last thought, he had tried to regain her good opinion by explaining the

fiendish persecution of this uncle. When he was tormented by constant dread of a reopening of his persecution, she had added to his troubles and anxiety by misjudging, even mistreating him; Now, too late, she realized her injustice, realized in her aching heart, that she had loved him, and would always love the memory of the Bon Villon who had come into her life, only to depart again in so tragic a manner.

She bowed her head on her arms and the tears, so long withheld, drowned her dark eyes while sobs shook her slender frame.

XVIII.

After bidding Sabine goodbye on the evening of the storm, Bon Villon had hurried back along the path hoping to reach home before the storm broke. Darkness came on quickly. Thunder rolled and before he was about half way back, rain began falling. By lightening flashes he saw Sergeant Karet hurrying along the path to meet him.

Just as he was in the act of hailing the sergeant he heard the swish-h-h of a rope, and felt it's coils tighten about him. Struggling to free himself he saw two men dash from the bushes and close in on him. He fought with all his power until jerked off his feet. In the struggle he heard Karet call out. Then dragged for short distance he was delt terrific blows on body and head, and a sudden pain seared into his brain. A last heavy blow to his head and stomach, and he lost consciousness.

When his dazed faculties returned Bon Villon felt the hard cold ground beneath him, and wondered why he was lying there in the darkness. Slowly his conversation with Sabine came back to him, then, step by step, he recalled the events leading up to

his loss of consciousness. He struggled to a sitting posture but the effort caused a terrific pain to shoot through his head. Raising his hand to the back of his head he found it painfully bruised and swollen.

"The cowards," he muttered. "They struck me from behind and there's no telling how long I've been in this dark Hades."

He crawled a little way in the darkness, then got unsteadily to his feet and felt his way along carefully. A dozen steps brought him up against a wall of earth which was as smooth as if scooped out with a shovel. He followed this wall around until it grew rough with rocks. Attempting to cross to the other side of his prison he stumbled against a large boulder, upon which he seated himself.

Realizing that he was confined underground, Bon Villon tried to recall all the caves in the hills and steep hollows not far from his home.

Rising, he started to make a thorough examination of his prison but, remembering that the utter darkness might be caused by its being really night, he seated himself again to wait until day. After what seemed hours the darkness lifted, and the gray dawn showed faint outlines of objects about him.

As it grew lighter the cave began to look familiar. At last he recognized it as one he had examined soon after coming to Louisiana, when his curiosity had been aroused by the story of a Boluxa Indian having

been murdered there. Gathering his scattered wits, he recalled that the cave was large and egg shaped.

"Thank God," he muttered aloud, and rising he stumbled across to where on that hot summer day of his visit, he slaked his thirst at a little spring. Yes here it was, a crystal fountain which rose, then sank again to feed the bayou which flowed just outside the cave.

Bon Villon knelt and drank long and thirstily of the cool water that revived and refreshed him. After bathing his feverish hands and face he searched for his handkerchief. Instead of his own fine velvet garb, with triple cravet, gold buckles and fine silk hose, he was now clothed in a country made suit of coarse cloth, and high top boots several numbers too large. This change of garments was puzzling, but more so was the fact that he was still alive. Had his enemies supposed him dead and left him here, or had they imprisoned him in the cave to die of starvation?

This thought recalled him suddenly from the speculative to the actual, and stepped across to where the light showing through large cracks revealed what he knew to be the one opening to the cave. This entrance was closed by stout saplings driven deep into the ground and secured firmly by the crossing of others, larger and stouter, over them.

Bon Villon began in a systematic way to try to remove them, but using all his strength, he worked

for two hourse without making the least progress. Deciding that it was useless to work longer with his bare hands, he bethought himself of what he might accomplish with a good sharp rock. Stopping to rest his tired back and bruised hands before another trial, he sat thinking, when suddenly his strained ears caught the faint echo of voices.

He glued his eyes to a crack, prepared to call for help, when, rounding the hill he saw two men coming straight toward the cave. By the peculiar hitch in the smaller man's walk he knew at once that he was to receive a visit from his uncle and captor. The other was the fellow who had tripped him at Smith's Tavern, then shot at him before making his escape.

At the sight of the delicately chiseled features of Cingaro, with their saintly whiteness and blue veins belied by the snaky glitter of the green eyes, a livid hatred filled Bon Villon. In his big clean manliness he marveled at the black soul hidden beneath that holy, womanish exterior. Ricardo was the murderer of his adored and unsuspecting brother and sister. The prisoner's hands clinched and his jaws snapped, but Cingaro was safe on the other side of the intervening stakes, and in his safety would have gloried in Bon Villon's mad agony had he known it.

Arriving at the cave Cingaro, or Ricardo Estebo to give him his true name, knelt down and peered through the stakes, his dull eyes gleaming with all the gleeful malice of Satan.

"Ah, hum, ha! The gay cavalier has revived." He drew back, stroking his chin softly with a white, beringed hand. "Yes, you have come to life, you sniveling hypocrite."

Bon Villon did not trust himself to speak. Don Ricardo should not gloat over the torment caused by his loathsome presence and priestly cacklings, so he drew farther back into the cave and was silent. This was not pleasing to Cingaro, for he had dreamed of a humble cringing captive, such as he himself would have been. Judging Bon Villon by himself was a flaw in Cingaro's almost perfect cunning and he realized it when Bon Villon arose and walked away.

Cingaro put his evil face nearer the crack and began talking in a smooth voice which carried back to where Senor Bon Villon had seated himself.

"My dear nephew, you cannot doubt now that I have you at my mercy, and knowing my purpose, as you must, you at least realize I am a factor to be reckoned with. Your friends all think you dead and there is no earthly hope for you, unless I choose to give it. If you are reasonable and will act according to my command, I am ready to help you." He waited a minute but the silence remained unbroken. "I wish to share with you some of the wealth you have such small need of in these woods," he continued. "And when you have revealed the whereabouts of the large fortune belonging to the

Estebos, then will I set you free, never again to be molested. I have you in my power, but prefer to be merciful to one of my own blood."

A mocking laugh echoed through the cave. Cingaro's face went dark at the sound, and when he spoke again it was in the hissing voice peculiar to his anger.

"You will not be entreated again, nor will I come near you until I am sent for. In the meantime you may dance the spider dance from wall to wall."

Before the hissing of the last words had died, the priest had scrambled to his feet and was crippling away followed by Bellaco.

Left to himself Bon Villon came to the opening and watched them go out of sight around the hill. The longer he pondered the situation the more hopeless it looked. Cingaro had won at last—he was capable of crimes and cunning not to be coped with by natural human beings. But why should Sergeant Karet and the wily Ocase give him up for dead so soon, and how did Ricardo know it? Sound reasoning convinced him the priest had lied. This made him feel more hopeful.

Soon the pangs of hunger assailed him, bringing thoughts of his cozy little kitchen and Liza's hot biscuit and coffee. A wintery wind coming through the cracks of the barricade brought his mind back to the cold, damp cave. Searching, he found a rock of the right size and shape, and set to

work to dig up one of the heavy stakes. For hours he dug, making some progress, but as he worked on and on disregarding his aching back and head, his strength suddenly failed him and he felt the earth slipping away beneath him, beneath his feet.

When consciousness returned he opened his eyes and attempted to get up but was seized with such a terrific pain in his head that he lay quite still until it abated. Fearing to move, he lay there, gazing out of his prison at a beautiful autumn high noon. The sun was shining gloriously but a chilly breeze rustled the tinted leaves which continually drifted to the ground to lie with a million others on the hill side. A large buck came leisurely out of the woods, head and great antlers erect, nibbling a leaf here and there before finally disappearing into the forest again. The day wore on until the sun dropping behind the trees left the sky all a glory.

Bon Villon awoke from a half stupor to find the pain in his head entirely gone. After refreshing himself at the spring, he walked up and down the cave, stretching his tired limbs and back. On the morrow he would succeed in the work he had started this morning. What were a few saplings to stand between a big strong man and freedom? His steps became buoyant with restored hope. His thoughts turned to Marcelena and the happy days to come when they would laugh at his present situation, and through the hours he lived again the

times they had met and loved. Each look and word of hers came back to brighten his lonely prison. Long after he had tired himself out and lay gazing out on the frosty starlit night, his thoughts were of her. So also were the dreams that came later, though they were often disturbed by the light pit-patter on the rocks outside, or the occasional scream of some beast coming down from the hills to investigate the human smell at the cave.

When Bon Villon woke again broad day was shining through the opening, and stealing in slanting rays across the floor of the cave. He was conscious of a dullness in his head, and a sense of hopeless depression after his long fast, but went to work with such energy that by night he should have been as free as the wind.

"So, you have decided to come out of it, senor?" questioned a mocking voice.

Bon Villon looked out to see Bellaco regarding his work scornfully. How long he had been watched he did not know. Grinning wickedly, Bellaco set to work to repair all his prisoner had destroyed, but not without some difficulty, as he had constantly to side step the well aimed rock Bon Villon hurled at him.

"There! I guess that will hold you until morning, then I will return and see how much damage you have done," said Bellaco, rubbing his bruises and walking off when he had completed his repairs.

Bon Villon gave up all hope of escaping by his own efforts, and when night came it found him pacing to and fro, weak and despondent over the futility of his plans. The strain of hunger and imprisonment was telling on him, and in his troubled dreams Cingaro came to torture him in the most awful ways. It was well toward morning when he fell asleep from utter exhaustion.

The sun was high in the sky when he was awakened by a whispered conversation beyond the barricade. He lay still in pretended sleep.

"Now, while he sleeps I will season this roast for my little partner. Ah, Bellaco, I poured over much but I can't be selfish. Could anything be more tempting than a brown, juicy roast? You may awake the lazy one now, perhaps he is a little hungry and I will stand aside and hear his thanks."

Bellaco must have hesitated for the soft mocking voice of the priest changed to a hissing whisper.

"Fool, hesitate to do as I bid and you shall eat every bit of it yourself!"

Then Bellaco called in a trembling voice, "Senor Bon Villon, wake up!"

Bon Villon lay still until Bellaco had called several times. Opening his eyes, he said in a weak voice, "Who is there?"

"It is Bellaco. I have brought you something to eat. See?" And he shoved the roast and some brown biscuit through the widest crack.

"Did the priest know you were going to bring it?"

"No, senor. I felt sorry for you and slipped off and fixed this roast myself. Now come and get it."

"I am so very weak and tired. Can't, can't you shove it a little nearer to me?"

"I can."

Bellaco pressed close to the crack, trying to get the tempting meal under the prisoner's nose. In a flash Bon Villon reached the meat and dashed it full force in his enemy's face. The villian staggered back, paralyzed with fright, and rolled to the ground.

"I am killed, I am poisoned!" he bellowed.

Bon Villon slid to the crack and watched the performance with delight. Cingaro swearing and gesticulating finally landed on Bellaco a kick which brought him back from his frenzy of fear.

"Get up, you howling fool, and wash your face."

"Oh Mary! Father, will it kill me?"

"No, but it ought to, you blithering idiot. You have betrayed me."

The priest gritted his teeth in rage for he now knew his prisoner would never eat food from him. Death by starvation was too slow to suit Cingaro's purpose, and in his fury at Bellaco he failed to notice the smiling face at the crack in the barricade. When he rock caught him in the pit of his stomach he crumpled up on the ground and lay still until

another rock flew over his head, warning him that he was still a target in good range. Then he wriggled to one side there to call down all the saints and devils to witness his revenge.

Bellaco, returning from the bayou with a face red from scrubbing with sand and water, thought the priest was still raving at him. Pleased for him to think it, Cingaro proceeded to swear at him in a terrible way, and still cursing, followed by Bellaco, he went away.

The savory smell of the roast set the prisoner wild with hunger and he was compelled to destroy every trace of it to keep from licking the places it had touched. For hours afterwards he grovelled on the floor of the cave in an agony of hunger that was worse than death. Late that evening he became more unconscious of any feeling and, at last lay motionless at the barricade and watched the stars come out one by one.

The moon that flooded the hills and woods with a cold, mellow light revealed a great yellow cat slinking around the hill, its padded feet making a light patter on the rocks. Closer and closer it came until the poisoned roast was found pounched upon and devoured in a flash. Then, sniffing around the cave opening for awhile, the animal turned and trotted toward the wood but ere it reached that shelter Bon Villon saw the long body leap into the air and roll on the ground in convulsions that ended soon in death.

Four long days and nights went by. Bellaco came each night and morning to see that the stakes were not loosened and to leave tempting food in the hope the prisoner would grow desperate and partake of it. No sooner was it deposited through the crack than Bon Villon threw it out for fear he might be tempted beyond resistance.

The eighth day of his imprisonment found him too weak to rise, so he lay close to the opening listening for Bellaco to approach, knowing full well that he was starved to the point where resistance to their plans was useless. He lay in a half stupor, his one idea to hear Bellaco when he approached. His horror of dozing, and having them murder him while he slept was all that kept him conscious.

Suddenly he heard his name called. He started up and looked into the shriveled face of Madame Lisso peering through a crack.

"Honey, honey, air ye thar? I knowed ye warn't dead," she was saying as he pulled himself nearer so she could see him.

"Food, mother, I am starving," he told her in a voice he would never have recognized as his own, so faint it was with weakness.

"Pore chile, I knowed ye'd be hongery. Come a little closer, son."

As he reached the crack she drew forth from a sack a bottle of rich, sweet milk and bade him drink of it."

"Now, stop, ma son. I be hearin' ov starvin' people killin' theyselves by stuffin' too much. Ye can hev more arter a while."

Bon Villon was impatient and begged for all of the milk but Madame Lisso was firm and waited for him to rest a few moments, then gave him another bottle which, to his unbounded delight, contained wine. In a short time the milk and wine had brought him a long way back towards his old self. He sat up bright eyed and anxious to listen to Madame Lisso.

"I be tae old tae strain me back at them poles but ole mother gwine ter fin' another way ter help her pore chile. They sergeant and Ocase been traipsin' roun' huntin' ye sense they found it warn't ye been kilt an et by de varmints, but Handsome Bill ez dey buried sa nice—but dey couldn't fool de ole witch," she chuckled to herself.

"Did they try to pass Handsome Bill off for me, mother?" asked Bon Villon eagerly. "Did they murder him just for that purpose?"

"Aye, ma son, dey git de robber somehow and 'low as how it be ye."

"Ah, now I see why Ricardo said they thought me dead."

"Aye, ma pore chile. But dis old critter warn't fooled. I tell Sabine an de good sergeant and dey be searchin' high an low fer ye. But I be goin' now

and stir up de settlement. Take dis knife and hole em off 'till some help comes."

And the old woman pushed through the crack the knife and what remained of the milk she had brought him.

"God bless you, mother. I will not forget you when I am free again."

Bon Villon's heart was full as he watched the misjudged old woman hobble away and disappear in the woods. He then went to the little spring that had been his one comfort during the eight weary days of his imprisonment and, stripping off his clothes, dashed and rubbed the icy water over himself until his sluggish blood coursed anew through his veins. As he stamped about, feeling his strength return, a sense of security came over him that he had not felt since the first day of his imprisonment.

The winter was advancing fast. A cold wind swept through leafless branches of the trees and whistled around the hills. Bon Villon sat on his rock out of reach of its biting touch and wondered why Bellaco was late paying his morning visit to the cave.

Soon he heard the baying of hounds, and Bellaco and the priest came hastily up to the cave. In his fear and excitement Bellaco did not look into the prison but began at once to tear at the saplings of the barricade.

XX.

A flickering fire burned with a dull, red glow in the lonely little house by the Dolette Bayou, lighting the dusky faces of Mulatto and Liza, but failing to dispel the gloom cast over them by the black night without and the silence within. It was two days since the funeral of their master and it was of him they were thinking as they sat hovered close together. They spoke only in occasional whispers, turning frightened faces to each other when the house creaked or the wind moaned through the trees. Their eyes grew wider and whiter as the occasional scream of a panther rose in a piercing shriek, to die away in a quavering wail like the cry of a lost child out in the lonely hills.

Liza threw on a pine knot and as the blaze shot up the wide chimney, leaned closer to Mulatto.

"It's pow'ful solum to be free folkes," she whispered.

Mulatto groaned mournfully, and looked at Liza as though the thought was too new and awful for him to reply.

"I ain't so proud ter be free as some niggahs ud

be," she continued. "I'd ruther hab Marse here wid us, dat I wud."

The tears rolled down her face while Mulato consolingly wiped them away with his shirt sleeves.

"Dis is a solemn time fer us, gal. I feels like er jedge atter he done pass judgment on er innocent man and 'lowed him ter be excited."

"Pore Marse Villon, nebber git ter smack his mouf ober his vittels no mo and 'low' to me as ahm de bes' cook in Louisiana, Lawd, Lawd, I cud stan' it ef pore Marse had died by death in er natchel bed and not been misfiggered by de howlin' varmints."

"Quit, gal! You horrors my feelin's." He laid his hands up, palms outward, as though warding off the horrible thoughts crowding around him. "Marse done crossed de ribber and cain't cum back."

He looked over his shoulder as though to make sure. Liza looked too, and the grotesque shadows cast by the flickering fire seemed like flitting spirits from another world. With frightened faces they sat gazing with stiffened muscles, until a log rolled over in the fire and sent up a shower of sparks that dispelled the lurking shadows with another bright blaze.

The rattle of a chain outside caused Liza to ask, "Ain't you unfasten dat dawg, niggah?"

"I clean forgot ter do dat, sho! Why ain't you mind me uv hit fo' dis unyearthy hour?"

"I 'lowed you turnt dat dawg loose whilst I'se

gittin' suppah. You kin loose him now and git mo kindlin' fer de fiah."

"Lawdy, honey, I'se all crippled up with de rheumatiz fum dis night air, ah fo' de Lawd, ef my pallet ain't done drap down. Sho's death's aridin', dere's a voodoo on dis place, sho'. Don't you recomember dat crawfish claw us foun' las' week? Dat's de cause er all disturbment. Somebody 'lows ter git dare claws on us. Ain't yer gwine ter tie up dis pallet, gal?"

Liza reached for a string and tied up a bunch of his kinky hair as tight as she could pull it to the top of his sharp head. The pallet it was believed would then resume its natural position.

"You bettah loosen date dawg, niggah, lak Marse K'ret done tole yo!"

"Dat dawg make nuff noise perootin' roun' wid dat chain."

Mulatto was not going to venture outside on this dark night, and edging his chair closer to Liza he determined to turn her thoughts in another direction.

"Does yo' lub yo' baby, gal?"

"Go 'way niggah," yawned Liza.

"Ah lubs yo' all de deep holes in de Dolette Bayou lippin' full, and I'se gwine ter long as de chiney berries hang to de trees, sho!"

"Dat's a long time, 'case when dey dries up, dey sho' stays. I'se gwine ter bed, me."

As she finished raking the coals off the hearth and rose to go, a low, deep growl reached their ears. She stopped still, her frightened eyes on Mulatto who had crept to the window and was peering through the vines.

Quickly turning he whispered, "Put out dat light. Dey's comin!"

Not waiting for Liza, he darted into the kitchen and climbed up the little ladder into the loft. Liza was at his heels, pulling the ladder up behind her. They crouched there in the darkness like fearful trembling wood rats.

The fierce growl and furious plunging of the dog was mixed with a loud hammering on the door and a loud voice which called, "Hello! Hello in there! You damned niggers get up!"

The door rattled again. Silence. A renewed banging.

"What can be the matter?" asked a slow, measured voice.

"Damned if I can tell," was the answer.

Wolf, after another spell of growling and chain rattling finally gave up and settled down. The two negroes in the loft heard again the soft voice, and thanked God the trap door to the loft was in the darkest corner of the kitchen.

"Pound the door down, Bellaco. The cursed infidel's abode is an abhorrence to the Lord as well as

the infidel himself. Make haste and pound it to splinters."

In the racket that that ensued breaking in the heavy door, Liza punched Mulatto in the ribs, making him jump and stifle a scream.

"Be still, niggah, dat's er preacher down dar," she whispered as she peeped through a crack into the room. Mulatto, screwing up his courage, had just glued his eye to the crack, when the door fell in with a crash that sent him rolling back into the dark corner. Liza, trembling with fright, looked again and saw two men enter the room. One, a cripple, went up to the fire and kicked the smouldering log.

"Wait, father," said the man at the door. "I'll get some kindling."

He stepped out on the gallery, and returning with an armful of pine he soon had the little room ablaze with light.

"Now, find the negroes, Bellaco. They are hiding somewhere."

Mulatto and Liza shivered inwardly at these words and listened as the men went from room to room in search of them. Giving up at last, they returned to the fire where they stood warming, unconscious that their movements were noted by two pairs of bright eyes in the loft.

Cingaro and Bellaco decided that the negroes had left the place before their arrival, probably because of fear of remaining in the house of their dead

master. The priest rubbed his shapely white hands together over the fire, and the chuckling in his throat sounded like two empty nuts cracking together, ever so softly.

"Ah, my dear Bellaco, this suits me excellently. I am in possession at last. The bird first, then the cage, eh, my son?"

Again his chuckle filled the room. Cingaro was in no hurry. He had contrived for this time too patiently and too long to lose one bit of the satisfaction and pleasure in it. He limped over to the cabinet in the corner, talking all the while, seeming to address Bellaco but chatting only for his own gratification.

"Now for some papers and loose cash," he said, approaching the cabinet and giving the middle drawer a vigorous pull. To his surprise it opened easily, almost causing him to lose his balance.

"Bellaco, bring me one of those infernal American candles that drips its juice on hands and clothes. Perhaps I'll find here some of my lordly brother's writing, my dear departed brother,—the supercilious Don Marcos, father of the brave Bon Villon, who taunt me with my honor."

He turned impatiently to Bellaco who had just found the candles.

"King Richard slew his brother to inherit a throne, I, my cursed kindred for revenge, and the Estebo riches that are rightfully mine. Now, my

son, hold the candle so I can see what it is necessary to take."

Cingaro drew out another drawer. It was empty, as were all the others drawn out in quick succession. Limping from side to side and swearing mightily, he tapped the cabinet for the secret drawer he suspected it contained. Almost wrecking it he scattered the drawers upon the floor, and began to search the house in every crack and crevice, tearing up the beds and even some of the boards from the floor. After he and Bellaco had gone over and over the three rooms they looked as if a storm had swept through them, they then returned to the fire, threw on more pine and sat down.

The priest was silent, his green eyes glittering through half closed eye-lids with the same expression one finds in the rattler, as he lies in wait for the rabbits to pass. As Bellaco watched the master he served, a look of livid hatred swept over his face, but it was only the hate of a bird drawn ever nearer by the charm of the serpent's lidless eyes.

Cingaro turned and caught his servant's look.

"Why are you staring at me so stupidly, fool?"

"Forgive me, father."

"I am not in a forgiving mood tonight, my son."

"Father why do you so often call me your son, when I am only your servant?" Bellaco asked the question that had often worried him. He knew the

priest bore him no love, yet he did not realize what a necessity he was in this strange, wild country.

Cingaro looked hesitantly at the servant.

"You may be surprised to hear it, but you are really my son, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh."

"Your son!" cried Bellaco. "Why, I am as old as you."

"Indeed no. You have not kept your age correctly, though I was very young, not yet of age, when you were born. Your mother, my son, is Amanda, of whom you are naturally so fond."

Bellaco looked long at the smirking priest. He knew this man had no fatherly feeling for him and doubted the truth of the confession Cingaro had chosen to make, and yet, that strange fear and fascination the priest held for him seemed to draw him closer in the circle. This thought was pleasant however compared to the idea of being a son of the bloodless Amanda. In his religious fanaticism he worshipped Cingaro as a priest, but the thought of Amanda filled him with loathing, as though a cold snail had crawled across his mouth and left its slimy trail thereon. He knew in his soul that Cingaro had lied to him.

Cingaro watched the effect of his confession with satisfaction. He considered his time poorly spent when not torturing something.

"Now, my son, you understand why I rescued you from your sinful, piratical career and have kept

you near me ever since. You will now inherit the Estebo estate with me. Instead of 'The Honorable Don Marcos and Sons'; it will be 'The Honorable Ricardo and Son'."

He smacked his white lips in pleasurable anticipation, while Bellaco waited in silence, fearing to disturb his gloating. At least the servant ventured to ask, "Father, you will now finish the senor since there is nothing else to do?"

"Nay! Nay! Speak not so, my son. Senor Bon Villon has been buried these many days. The Phantom Rifleman at his last flitting, ferried my beloved nephew across the River. When I am again in Spain living in the arms of luxury, I shall say masses for the soul of my kin, especially for that of my nephew who was devoured by the vultures and had not the pleasure of passing to realms unknown through the mouth of this tiny bottle."

Here he fingered a small vial, slick and shiny from long use. Bellaco shivered at the sight of it, for he knew the contents of that bottle and was afraid. Cingaro watching him, chuckled and rose, stretching his crippled leg.

"Come, there is nothing here for us. This time tomorrow night I will be on my way to the Red River, then, heigh-ho for Spain and riches."

Bellaco noticed the priest said *I* and not *we*, and

shivered again as he followed his master from the house.

Mulatto and Liza lay very still after the last sound of the departing men had died away. The conversation they had heard awakened strange ideas in their crude mind. They had just ventured to whiper a few words when again the sounds of footsteps and a voice speaking to Wolf came to their ears. A few minutes later Ocase Mataha stepped into the room and looked searchingly around.

"Where are the negroes, Lebo?" he called in a gruff voice, and an instant later the giant favorite came through the door.

"Kinder tore things up as they went, eh, chief?" he said, looking around the disordered room.

Chief Ocase walked to the other room, and finding it empty, looked into the kitchen, then came back to the fire.

"Where did the fool negroes go, I wonder?"

"Here us is, Marse Ocasy."

The outlaws looked at each other in surprise when from the ceiling, in the same hoarse whisper came the words, "Is dat Marse Ocasy sittin' down dere now?"

Ocase stamped his foot.

"Who in hell is that?"

"Hits de Lawd's servants," said Mulatto, still whispering.

"Well, where in the devil are you? Have you all turned to ghosts in this house?"

"We tuck en clum up heah in de loff, Marse Ocasy."

"Well, you can 'tuck en clum' down from there or I'll put some holes in the planks you are on."

Before he finished speaking the negroes shuffled across the loft, fairly tumbling over each other, come down the ladder and into the room.

"What the hell were you doing up there?" asked the Indian as the breathless negroes stood before him.

"Hidin' up dere."

"Hiding from what?"

"Dat preacher an his offspring."

"Tell us about them. That's what we're here for."

"Lawdy, Marse Ocasy, dere's been rampam doin's at dis house tonight. Oh Lawdy, Liza, speak up an say sumpin' bout dese gwining ons we seed thru' de crack."

"How long since they were here? Tell us quick."

The half breed showed some excitement as the negroes tried to tell what they had seen and heard. Before they had finished speaking Ocase turned to Lebo.

"Ride like the wind for my horse."

In a very short time Lebo returned with the horse and a bloodhound. The new dog and Wolf were

brought into the house and permitted to smell the floor and chairs, then turned loose in hot pursuit of the priest Cingaro and his accomplice.

A few hours later, after day had dawned, Mulatto looked up from his work to see Monsieur Karet and Joe Sohone on their horses at the door. He started toward them in a long trot. The sergeant had come to meet Ocase and inquired of the negro if he had yet arrived. Mulatto, fairly bursting with information, gave a disconnected account of what had taken place the night before. His imagination given full sway confused Karet and Joe no little as to the actual facts.

"Which direction did Ocase and the hounds take?" Karet asked as Mulatto began telling again, how in "De dead hours ob de night dat preacher man tuck en fling one drawer in dis d'rection, and de nex' one in dat. Dey sot out zackly souf, right 'long side ob dat chicken coop, zackly on dat spot. Wolf shot out'en de house an went jumpin' er long lak he wuz on er spring. Marse Ocasy din tuck en guv er holler dat made dis niggah go straight in de air. Lawdy, cain't dat man holler? He! He!" Mulatto slapped his thigh. "Den dey went out'en de distance, clost ter dat tallest pine."

"What time was it then?"

"Jes' as de moon sot."

"Then they have several hours start of us, Joe, we'll have to ride."

Off they went in the direction Mulatto had indicated. If Karet had been alone he could hardly have followed the trail, but Joe, a thorough woodsman, had not the slightest trouble. A strong friendship had sprung up between the sergeant and Joe Sohone, one of the worst men in the robber band. Karet could not but admire Joe's keen judgment and loyalty to his friends, while Joe would have gone against anyone but his chief for the lively Frenchman, who had proved true metal in the long and fatiguing search for Senor Bon Villon. Constantly together day and night, each had broadened the other. It was nearing noon before they came within hearing of the other party, the encouraging shouts to the dogs coming to them quite plainly.

"Something wrong, sergeant. They are falling back to start the dogs on the tracks again," said Joe.

"Singular that those two sagacious hounds would lose the scent," answered Karet.

They spurred their horses and were soon in sight of Ocase and Lebo who were now ascending a hill close at the heels of the hounds. As Karet and Joe drew near they noticed the hounds suddenly stop, tuck their tails and refuse to go further. Ocase's "Whoop! Wooah, go!" only caused them to sniff around a little and come back to gaze pitifully at their master, who urged them on with a stream of profanity. He paid no attention to the arrival of

Karet and Joe, but Lebo explained to them that the priest had put something on the scent which completely baffled the dogs' pursuit. Seeing it was useless to urge the dogs more, Ocase wheeled his horse and gave orders. Karet and Joe were to take Wolf and circle to the left and, if they picked up the trail, fire a gun as a signal, while he and Lebo covered the ground to the right.

Karet and Joe rode slowly, encouraging Wolf who trotted ahead of them nosing the ground carefully, but never giving the glad yelp that would indicate he was on the trail again. Rounding a steep slope the two men entered the open woods and to their surprise, came upon the witch, Madame Lisso.

"How did she get over here?' exclaimed the sergeant.

"She is everywhere. They say she rides a broom."

Karet smiled as he saw her pony standing near. The old woman had heard them and waited, so Karet went toward her, reluctantly followed by Joe. Madame Lisso bent and shriveled as ever, her short brown skirt and flopped bonnet the color of the pine needles on the ground where she stood, motioned with her bony hand for them to stop.

Sergeant Karet dismounted and greeted her kindly, explaining his surprise at finding her so far from home.

"Tish! Tish!" she said, her little black eyes looking askance at Joe who remained a short distance

away on his horse. "I be too ugly fer the varmints to pester, an I hev words fer ye."

"What is it mother? We are still searching."

"Then spare na time. Go straight to Ocase Mataha and tell him fer de ole witch that de Senor Bon Villon's life hangs by a hair, an ef he be atter sabin' him, go direct to de cave whar he kilt de Boluxa Indian. An our Queen ov de Holy Rosary len' wings to yer horse's feet."

"In a cave you say?" asked Karet in a puzzled voice.

"Aye, in de cave ov de Boluxa brave. Ocase will know. Now fly, it mout already be too late."

Karet stepped aside and fired his pistol and the arswering shot came. While they waited the sergeant helped the old woman to mount her pony and watched her amble off in the direction of Bon Villon's house, there to wait the tidings, evil or good, that the evening would bring.

XIX.

After leaving Bon Villon's house, Cingaro and Bellaco walked slowly through the woods towards the cave which they intended visiting for the last time that morning. Then, their work in Louisiana completed, they would go to the Red River, thence to New Orleans and on to Spain. The priest was in high good humor at the prospect before him, for Bellaco's account of his prisoner's condition on the previous day, convinced him it would be an easy matter to force Bon Villon to give the information so necessary to his own plans. They traversed the three miles of woods and emerged on a hill near where they had found a convenient hiding place for their captive. All these days, while searching parties were miles away scouring every out of the way place in the settlement, Cingaro and Bellaco had rested securely at the very back door of their prisoner's home.

Gray dawn was breaking as the priest and his servant halting for a few minutes rest, heard the the distant yelp of hounds on the trail. Bellaco, terrified, begged the priest to hurry, but Cingaro

silently proceeded to rub on the soles of his shoes a peculiar liquid he carried in his clothes. He motioned Bellaco to do likewise, then made off over the hill as fast as his twisted leg could carry him, the servant pale with fright, beside him. They took a round-about way to the cave, stopping at intervals to put the liquid on their shoes. Arriving at the cave they began tearing and pulling at the stakes with which they had blocked the entrance.

As Bellaco attempted to climb to the top of the stakes to untie them, he felt a sudden, terrible pain and fell shrieking to the ground at Cingaro's feet, the blood streaming from a deep gash in his leg.

"You hound of hell!" cried the priest. "Any more such tricks and I'll put a bullet in your heart."

There was a movement within the cave, and Bon Villon having inflicted some damage on his enemies, retreated deeper within his prison.

"Quick, fool!" the priest ordered Bellaco. "Untie these poles and break in the barricade."

Bellaco was between two fires. Behind him was the faint yelping of disappointed blood hounds. Before him was the enemy who had stabbed him, and the priest who, angry and swearing was tugging at the poles of the barricade. With an oath Cingaro turned to his servant, insensate rage in his eyes. Trembling, Bellaco hastened to the assistance of his master and the two began wildly to tear down

the wall they had erected across the entrance of the cave.

"Hurry, Bellaco. Pull this stake aside and let me at him," whispered Cingaro. A trapped rattler could not have been more nervously furious than the priest now near the fulfilment of his long contemplated victory.

At the sudden braying of hounds Bellaco turned to look behind him.

"Run, father, run. They are upon us!" he shrieked, leaping the bayou and dashing off into the woods.

Cingaro turned to look into the beady eyes of Chief Ocase. A little screech escaped him as he realized he had been caught red-handed.

"Ough, you dog priest, you slimy snake in the grass," grunted the Indian seizing him. Cingaro began to struggle and scream for Bellaco. But Bellaco did not return nor did the priest's struggles break the hold Ocase had on his collar.

"I am a holy priest, you ruffian. Unhand me!"

"The devil take all such bad priests, you killer of children. I will show you how much I love a priest!"

Jerking Cingaro clear of the ground, the Indian shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Ocase! Ocase!" came a joyful cry from behind the barricade.

At the sound of Bon Villon's voice Ocase's face showed his relief, but he could not release his hold

on the struggling priest in order to help him. As Karet dashed up the Indian pointed to the cave, and the Frenchman peering between the stakes, grasped the hand Bon Villon extended through a small opening.

"Alive! Alive! Thank God! Are you hurt, senor?"

"No, my good friend, I am not hurt," and wrung Karet's hand in his joy at beholding that genial face again. "Now, sergeant, help me to get out of here."

Surrendering the priest to Lebo and Joe who had now arrived, Ocase turned to help Karet remove the barricade. Soon they made an opening large enough to admit them and crawled in. The sergeant with his arm about Bon Villon began to question him, while Ocase stood surveying the cave. Before Bon Villon had an opportunity to express his thanks the Indian turned and left.

Bon Villon showed Karet over his prison, then free and happy, stepped out into the world again. Ocase and his followers had disappeared. The thought of what the Indian chief would do to Ricardo Estebo, alias Father Cingaro, flashed across Bon Villon's mind. Turning to Karet with a swift gesture, he stumbled and from sheer weakness sank to the ground. Karet knelt beside him and wiped the perspiration from his brow. "Careful fellow, your'e weak yet." he said as he assisted Bon Villon back on his feet. Bon Villon thought with lighten-

ing swiftness, but too weak to act, spoke quickly, shortly, to Karet.

"Get me on a horse. Find Ocase and delay what he is doing. Tell him for me that this is my affair and I'll attend to it."

When Karet located Ocase and the Mexicans they were tieing a rope around the squirming, protesting priest who was telling them repeatedly that he was a priest and a nobleman of Spain, and that they dare not touch him. Seeing that the outlaws were indifferent to his ancestry and church standing, he changed his tune, pleading and cringing, but Joe Sohone disgusted, gave him a kick, declaring hanging was no more fun than hanging a rat.

Sergeant Karet dashed up on his horse with Bon Villon's message. It was received by Ocase in a cool, stolid manner.

"The cap's out of his head. Lebo, Joe, swing 'em up."

Karet, glad the Indian was ignoring Bon Villon's orders, said nothing more, and watched the preparations with no little satisfaction.

Bon Villon hastening up was spied by the priest.

"Save me, nephew! Hurry, hurry! Save me, save me!" screamed Cingaro, hope flooding his cowardly heart.

At Ocase's signal, Joe and Lebo hoisted the fake holy man on Ocase's horse. The rope was tied securely about a large limb, and it took but a

moment and the slash of a whip to make the animal spring from under the eloquent Ricardo and leave him dangling in the air with a broken neck.

Too late, Bon Villon reached the spot. Silently he regarded the work of the Indian, and his mind went back to his home in Spain. He saw his proud father—He remembered his brother and playmate, Benito, and little Juanita—He studied long the object dangling beneath the tree—Uncle—. This thing, when a child, had been greatly loved by Bon Villon's father. Perhaps—Ocase's way was just as well. The Estebo's were revenged. A great weight rolled off his heart, he sighed and turned away to hear Ocase giving orders for the search for Bellaco.

"Wait, Ocase." he called. "Let the other poor wretch go. He was only a dupe in the hands of my uncle. Let him go."

Ocase started to ride on, but wheeled his horse and gave Bon Villon a cool, stolid stare. "Ough—Let him go you say. Well, let him escape—If he can."

Mounting their horses, without another look at the object swaying, turning, beneath the leafless trees, they rode toward Bon Villon's home. As they went he told them all that had happened since he was taken prisoner.

XXI.

From the depression into which the death of Bon Villon and his explanatory letter had plunged her, Marcelena received a joyful shock. Sergeant Karet, passing the house on the Bayou San Miguel in search for Bon Villon, had stopped long enough to tell her of Madame Lisso's identification of the dead man as Handsome Bill, and to assure her that they would yet find the Spaniard alive. But the days of anxious waiting—of uncertain news—of fruitless search ate at her heart. To be so fearfully anxious and yet so pitifully unable to help was driving her frantic. At last in desperation she decided it would be impossible to endure another day of suspense.

Coming to this decision in her retreat on the bayou where she sat in the welcome sunshine, she rushed up the path and into the house to shock Senora Amata with the announcement that she was going to ride immediately to the home of Senor Bon Villon, there to await news of him. She asked that Guydo be allowed to accompany her. Amata was unconvinced that her daughter was acting wisely,

but so dear to her heart was Marcelena's happiness that it was impossible to refuse her anything within the bounds of reason.

This morning as she stood watching her children gallop off into the woods she was not at all sure Don Leona would approve the permission she had granted, but confident of her ability to pacify him, she had permitted Marcelena and Guydo to ride off to Bon Villon's home.

Marcelena led Guydo a merry chase this morning. Her face, a study in anxious meditation, was lit occasionally by a hopeful expression. If her lover was alive she would be near him, proving her love as she felt he would do for her in like circumstances; and if he were dead, her place would still be at his side. The sad, haunted look of the past week shadowed her eyes, and spurring her pony she went at a still faster gait, unmindful of her brother's remonstrances.

Guydo feared for his little sister and dreaded to see hope die out of her eyes again. To him it seemed far more probable that another funeral would take place than that there would be rejoicing. His thoughtful eyes had a far away look as he compared his sister's sorrow, even, if the worst came, to his own living sorrow; for Guydo's love for Sabine had not died when she had been forced to marry the notorious half-breed and he spent his time now studying for priesthood.

Marcelena and Guydo came to the crossing of the bayou that washed over sand so white it caused their horses to shy before they sprang across. A curve in the trail and they came in sight of the home of Bon Villon.

"Oh, Guy!" cried Marcelena who was seeing the house for the first time. "Look at his house, and see, there is a crowd on the gallery. What can it mean? Holy Mother of Jesus, stay with me; if I find sorrow there it will kill me." She drew a long, quivering breath, then a light that seemed touched by heaven came over her face. "Oh, Guy, look coming to meet us!"

Then her lover's arms were about her lifting her to the ground, and clasping her close.

'T'hank heaven for bringing you back to me! But where have you been? What has happened to you? I can hardly believe my eyes." The tears came as she looked on his pale emaciated face.

"Yes, thank heaven for restoring me to you again. I will tell you all about my imprisonment by Ricardo when we are alone. I only wish to look at you now."

"And you know, we thought you dead. Oh, how happy I am! But there, Guy is returning from the stable and all your friends are staring at us. Come sweetheart, you are pale and need rest. I shall appoint myself head nurse and begin my duties by ordering you to rest."

She proudly led the way to where Bon Villon's friends were congregated. Among them was Sabine who seemed a little embarrassed as Marcelena caught sight of her, but it was all forgotten as the senorita threw loving arms about her, kissed her warmly on both cheeks and said how beautiful she had grown since their last meeting. Sabine stood blushing and happy, the joy of seeing Marcelena and Bon Villon again, making her for the moment forgetful of her own unhappy past. And, though she would never have admitted it, there was another present whose absence would have left a vacancy which neither of her much loved friends could have filled.

Sergeant Karet stood, a silent figure, carelessly blowing smoke from a cigarette, yet never losing a word from Sabine's mouth or a motion of her golden head.

Marcelena, spying Karet, left Sabine and went to shake hands with him.

"How glad I am to see you, my friend," she said.

The sergeant threw his cigarette away and returned Marcelena's greeting without, however, losing sight of Sabine who had moved over close to her grandmother. The old woman was eagerly scanning the faces of the people present. A look of bitter hatred crossed her features whenever her glance turned to where Ocase sat with Joe and Lebo. The half-breed was apparently indifferent to all going on about him, but nothing escaped his glitter-

ing black eyes. The sergeant's gallant attentions to Sabine, the look in his eyes that rarely wandered from her fair face, and which, intentionally or otherwise he made no slightest effort to conceal, caused every drop of savage blood in the half-breed to rise up in jealous rage.

Old Asa sat close beside Madame Lisso, his simple mind puzzled and confused at the buzzing conversation going on about him. Whenever his stupid gaze fell on Ocase a film of hatred darkened them, and his bony fingers twitched nervously. He had never forgotten the abduction of Sabine nor the terrible blow the Indian had delt him.

Marcelena, anxious to be near Bon Villon, went and sat by his side, listening wide-eyed as he again told of his experience at the hands of Ricardo. The oh's,—and ah's,—which his thrilling account brought from the pouting red lips of his senorita was as wine in the cabillero's veins. When she slipped a soft hand in his and murmured tenderly in his ear, he was perhaps too happy, for at that moment he caught a glimpse of Ocase's eyes, malevolent, glittering, as they darted from Karet to Sabine.

Sabine had crowded close to her grandmother who turned and studied her thoughtfully before saying, "Sae lak ma beautiful darter ye be ta day."

Bon Villon caught the words of the old woman.

"Tell us about Sabine's father, Grannie," he said,

leaning closer. "It will relieve my mind of much anxiety and can certainly do no harm now."

Madame Lisso's eyes receded far back in her head and she remained silent a minute. Then, straightening her bent form, she looked around on the little party of listeners.

"Hit's like livin' agin tae see ma gran'darter sae lak ma own lettle darter, and they senor is as lak his paw as lak can be. It travels me back tae de old days when Asa's paw an me watched our leetle darter grow tae be a likesome gal ez Sabine be now, en long comes er young Spanish genman and married her."

"Married her!" burst from Bon Villon's lips.

"Aye, I be hevin' they certify as jined em, an a good priest said de words. Ma darter's man was Don Marcos Estebo!"

Madame Lisso glanced from one serious face to another.

"Thank God," said Bon Villon, much moved. "My always honorable father, in this one thing I doubted you; pardon me, my dear father."

Going to the mystified Sabine he held out his arms.

"My little sister, as I have suspected since the day I saw your ring, my only living relation."

He kissed her and explained that her ring had been one always worn by his father, Don Marcos Estebo. Sabine threw her arms about her brother's

neck and laughed and cried for joy. Then, kneeling at her grandmother's side she buried her face in the shriveled shoulder, while Madame Lisso mumbled words unintelligible to all save the little girl who all her life had gone to her granny for sympathy and comfort.

The weeping Sabine felt a pair of plump arms steal about her.

"My dear school-mate and best friend, I am so glad for you," said Marcelena in her rich voice. And the two girls kissed each other as girls have done since time began.

"My love the sister of Bon Villon and wife of the Indian!" breathed Karet, his surprise as great as Sabine's.

Going over he took her hands in his and for a long moment stood looking into her shining eyes. She returned his gaze as though she saw heaven reflected in his face. He told her how happy he was in her joy, and showed his heart so plainly that Marcelena glanced uneasily from them to Bon Villon, who in turn looked at Ocase: the Indian was watching Sabine and Karet with such a savage look that Bon Villon's face blanched with fear for them.

Poor Asa, not understanding all this weeping and kissing and congratulation, could only turn his poor puzzled head from one to another. Sabine seemed happy over something but still she was weeping, perhaps because she was the captured wife of the

Indian. The old man's eyes hardened as he looked at the scowling Ocase.

Bon Villon, at this moment, welcomed the sight of Colonel Cushing and Marcel Desoto who were dismounting at the gate. In the stir that succeeded their arrival Ocase slowly rose to his feet and came forward, his smouldering eyes scanning Sabine's face. Then, before Bon Villon had a chance to speak, he calmly walked down the path and disappeared in the woods.

Karet's looks of love as he held Sabine's hands had caused all the white instincts of the half-breed to lose themselves in the red, and desire for revenge was working in his heart. Ough, sister of the cap: had he not known it all along? Even that would not save her now. And he would show that gay French sergeant how Chief Ocase Mataha could avenge himself. His Chickasaw blood was boiling as he rode through the woods. He gave his horse a blow that sent it flying, and with a war whoop galloped away between the trees. The yell was plainly heard at the home of Bon Villon.

"That was Ocase," said Bon Villon anxiously. Sabine's happiness took wings at the sound, and a strange dread filled her heart, while a cloud settled over the little party.

Liza and Mulatto still regarding their master as more spirit than man, had prepared a feast for him and his friends, and there have been few gatherings

stranger than the one seated around Bon Villon's board on that mild fall day. All drank to the health and return of their host who beamed with pleasure and gratitude for such friendship. After dinner the guests gradually took their departure until Guydo and Marcelena, Sabine and Karet were the only ones left. Finally Mulatto brought the Sepulvedor horses around to the block. Guydo had been a silent observer all day. He had not congratulated Sabine when the others had, but now, when saying good bye, he told her he rejoiced in her good fortune and wished her many more wonderful surprises.

Bon Villon accompanied Marcelena to her horse. Before lifting her to the saddle he caught her in his arms and covered her blushing face with kisses. Then, as she and Guydo rode away, he watched until the woods hid her from his gaze.

Karet lingered at the home of Bon Villon awhile before leaving to attend his own neglected duties at Spanish Town. The sergeant rode leisurely along the road to the fort, glad to be alone that he might reflect upon the astonishing revelation of the day, and how the changed circumstances, so wonderfully good for Sabine, were to affect him. He knew that his love for her must meet with Bon Villon's approval, now more than ever, for the senor had shown his disapproval of the marriage with Ocase on the occasion of their only talk on the subject. And the Indian, for whom he had laid aside his feel-

ings to further the search for Bon Villon, was now subject to capture again.

All the impossibility of his winning Sabine came over him, casting him into new depths of despondency.

He had ridden many miles when a horseman came in view riding toward him. At first he thought it Ocase, but as the rider drew near he recognized Joe Sohone, his companion of the last week. Joe was riding Ocase's little race horse, Antonie. He hailed Karet familiarly.

"Hy,—sergeant! I s'picioned you'd take this road so I come to meet you."

"Good. Going to Spanish Town, Joe?"

"Not today, sergeant. My wife's sick. I brung you a message from the Chief."

"Well?" Karet's voice hardened. A black look swept his face.

"He wants you to meet him tomorrow evening at Dolette Ford."

"What for?"

"Gawd knows. He's been 'er raisin' hell with us boys, an if I ware you sergeant, I'd not go nigh there or fool with him."

Karet rode in silence a moment, his gaze on the road ahead, his expression set and hard. He knew Joe liked him and was advising him because it would be dangerous for him to meet the half-breed tomorrow.

"I'll be there, Joe. Tell your Chief that for me."

"But, sergeant, you'll shorely take Senor Bon Villon with you?"

"Did Ocase want the senor?"

"No, but—"

"Then I will not bother him."

Joe held out his hand to the Frenchman.

"Well, I must hurry home to my sick wife or I'd shore go with you myself."

"Thank you, Joe, for your friendship, but no one ever knew a Brussard to fail an appointment," said Karet, and shaking hands they separated.

XXII.

Senor Bon Villon insisted that Sabine remain at his home until morning. He wished to talk over plans for her future and make arrangements for her safety. The stigma of her being the wife of the half-breed was becoming painful, and a solution of the problem of her marriage was necessary. He recalled his first visit to the home of Ocase. Notwithstanding the fact that Ocase at that time resembled the white race far more than his Indian ancestors, Bon Villon had been shocked to find a white girl presiding over his cabin, and when, in tears and confusion, she had told him her wrongs, he had thought her story the most pitiful he had ever heard. Now, as his sister, the situation was impossible. With Sabine's view of marriage, her bonds were irrevocably tied.

While these thoughts were passing through Bon Villon's mind, Sabine was rattling on in a happy way about the delights of having a real brother whom she had already learned to depend on and love. Bon Villon, not wishing to mar her joy, entered into her gay mood and left the unpleasant

things for another time. He resolved, however, that not one stone should be left unturned to secure his little sister's happiness. On the morrow he would take her home, for he knew she would return to Ocase and resume the burden of her life. But the half-breed would be warned in a way that could leave no doubt in his mind about how she was to be treated.

Bon Villon had reclined most of the afternoon in a hammock which Mulatto had resurrected from the loft. Nevertheless, he was weak and tired, and his head hardly touched the pillow before sleep overtook him, so he never knew of the light kiss that was imprinted on his forehead, and the prayer of thankfulness that Sabine whispered to the Virgin for him.

Sabine was awakened next morning by Liza lighting a fire on the hearth. For a moment she wondered where she was, then, remembering, a joyful light broke over her face. Leaping out of bed she flung the little shutters open and gazed out on a beautiful frosty morning. After breakfast, she and Bon Villon started gaily off down the path, but as they drew near Ocase's cabin, all the joy went out of the morning. Something dark and forboding surrounded and silenced them. The wind rattled the bare trees. They found Ocase at home, sitting by a big fire and so cheerful much of Bon Villon's distrust vanished. Nevertheless he talked

to him straight and earnestly, studying him the while to see if any treacherous motive lurked hidden behind the beady eyes. If only gold would tempt the Indian the situation could be easily handled, he thought. But of gold there were unknown quantities in Ocase's cave, and Bon Villon knew him too well to imagine the offer of more would tempt him where the possession of his white wife was concerned.

Ocase talked so freely, and agreed so readily to whatever plans Bon Villon mentioned, that the senor finally left, not easy in his mind, but with the idea of playing for time, for compromise. Sabine was all the family he had now—He was proud of her—She was so beautiful.

"Dam such dare devil bravery," he swore, thinking of Karet's carelessness in the presence of Ocase the day before.

After Bon Villon left Ocase sat a long time in absolute quiet. Sabine left him alone as usual. So much had happened for her to think about. Proudly she pondered the thought of being sister to the aristocratic Bon Villon, and daughter of a Spanish grandee, *Oui.* Not ill born, *mon dieu,* how thrilling. She also thought of Karet. She tried not too, but she did, more often than of the other things that had happened. Occasionally she peeped out at Ocase still sitting so quietly on the gallery. Somehow his silence today was frightening. Why so still, so

long—She nervously stopped her work to look at the beautiful jeweled locket her new brother had clasped around her neck. Tears of happiness swelled to her eyes as she looked at her father's likeness, and forgot her surly Indian husband and all the sorrow he had caused her.

The day wore on. Dinner was over and Ocase had sat silent all the while, only grunting when Sabine ventured to question him. At last he rose and walked about restlessly. Sabine thought he had gone into the woods, when, glancing through the little window, she saw him watching her with such an evil look that a cry rose to her lips. She checked it and turned away to get out of sight of his cruel eyes.

As she turned away she heard him walk to the side of the cabin and stop. Then a grinding noise came to her ears and peeping through a tiny crack in the crude shed room, she saw her husband at the grindstone, sharpening his hunting knife. Sabine was thoroughly frightened. She had seen him sharpen his knife often but never had he looked as he did today. Even in his most passionate moods he had never seemed so much the cruel Indian as he did now, lurking around, stealthily watching her in that wild and savage way. She watched him a moment and saw him glance toward the cabin. Unable to bear it longer she decided to slip out the back door, gain the woods while her husband was not

looking, go to her brother's house and never return. She sped to the door of the ante-room and lifted the latch, but the door did not move.

She shoved gently, then with all her strength, but it did not open. The thought flashed over her that Ocase had fastened it on the outside. Standing there half frenzied by her helplessness, she caught again the grinding sound. Pale, her breath coming in short gasps, she glanced at the front door standing open. Should she run for it? She did—and darted right into the arms of Ocase. He pushed her back into the room and looked at her with eyes that glowed with savage, pent up jealousy. Still eying her, he took a step nearer, and Sabine, frightened out of all caution, screamed and attempted to run past him, only to be shoved across the room so violently that she fell across the table and lay there a moment stunned.

There had not been a word spoken, no sound save Sabine's frightened scream and a sobbing breath as she hit the table.

"Monsieur Karet's mistress seems frightened in her husband's house!" said Ocase in a cold, sneering voice as Sabine got to her fet.

Then this was it, she thought. She found her voice.

"You accuse me of that? Of perfidy? How dare you say such things! I will go to my brother and he will teach you to accuse me!"

She spoke bravely but her eyes kept turning from his black glittering eyes to the sharp hunting knife at his belt.

"Your brother cannot help you now, nor can your lover who has tried so hard to capture the husband who stood in his way. Ough! I guess you had it all planned, but I was too sharp for you." He came closer and seized her wrist. "Yes, your man was too sharp for both of you. Only one thing will save you, only one chance I give you, go with me on the trail, carry my game bag and my papoose. Do you hear? Feed my dogs and wait on me as my squaw. You can choose this, or death!"

He tapped his knife significantly and she knew he meant what he said. But the thing he proposed was far worse than death; she would never promise, never. Ocase saw the determination in her eyes.

"You will either go with me on the trail or to Dolette Ford. Take your choice—and be quick!"

"Why the ford?" she asked in a choking voice.

"I have a meeting there with the sergeant and I thought you would like to see him once again."

Sabine closed her eyes and shuddered. Then she straightened up and showed some of her brave father's blood.

"Take me to the ford, you cruel beast. Yes, the ford a thousand times over."

The murderous gleam in the half-breed's eyes deepened. His whole countenance settled into an

impassive fixedness as he pointed down the trail that led to the ford.

Sabine started ahead with swift steady steps, her proud little head held high. She felt she had reached the crisis of her eventful life. She tried to think rationally of what would happen or, perhaps already had happened. Ocase was cunning enough to know what would make her suffer most. She thought of the sergeant and a cold hand clutched her heart. Ocase had murdered him and was taking her there to see his dead body.

"Merciful God," she whispered and faltered in her steps.

Ocase gave he a quick shove that steadied her again. They strode on down the trail. To what? The question throbbed through her brain. She thought her unbounded happiness of yesterday a dream. Was it really she for whom the rose tints of life had seemed to begin to glow? And now, after one day of bliss, it was to be torn away from her, this blessed cloak of kindred and protecting love, by an Indian brute.

Sabine trembled as though the black eyes of the half-breed were boring through her brain and her steps quickened unconsciously. Then, with sudden bravery, she wheeled and faced him, her imperious look and flushed face defying the treacherous look of her husband. She felt sustained by the red blood of generations of brave warrior ancestors.

Ocase raised his fist as he met the dauntless blue eyes flashing before him. For an instant there was a look of sympathy for her bravery, a trait he admired above everything but against the savage hate settled on his face and he silently motioned her to proceed.

"I must know what we shall find at the ford."

"We shall find your lover perhaps," was the leering reply.

Sabine's head bent and she pressed her hand to her heart. He had murdered Sergeant Karet and in that moment of agony she knew she loved the sergeant better than life. Now he was dead—murdered by this monster before her. A fury took possession of her and in an instant she had seized the little stilleto she kept about her, and struck with all her might at the heart of the Indian. Ocase dodged the attack and reached out to crush her to the earth with one blow. Then, sinking his fingers into the masses of her golden hair, he dragged her to the ford with stoic indifference to her struggles and screams. He produced buck skin thongs and bound her firmly to a tree, then stood off and watched her as she panted for breath. Finally, he spoke, his gutteral voice clogged by the jealous furry that smouldered in his black eyes like live coals.

"You have not seen the dead body of your gallant sergeant yet, have you?"

Sabine trembling looked round the dark shadows

of the woods, but finding nothing horrible in sight, let her agonized gaze fall again on the dark sinister face of her husband.

"You will see your lover soon, I have his word for it, and I think you will enjoy the little scene I have prepared."

Ocase drew his sharpened hunting knife from his belt, and running his fingers over it leered at her. Then, with a dexterous throw, he buried it into the tree, so near to her head that it severed a lock of her hair and surprised a terrified scream from her. Sabine knew that this was but the beginning of torture for her. She almost swooned when an instant later, he jerked the knife from the tree, looked at the sun, then knelt with his head to the ground and listened.

An exultant look spread over his face as he rose.

"Ough! He comes!"

The earth seemed to tremble and shake beneath Sabine but she steadied herself and listened for the first sound of Karet's approach, prepared to scream and warn him of his danger. Ocase, divining her thought, leaped behind her just as she heard hoof beats down the trail and screamed the sergeant's name. The half-breed's hand closed over her mouth and she struggled helplessly while Karet rode swiftly into the trap.

The Frenchman had heard her stifled scream, and not understanding, urged his horse through the

bushes and was right upon them before he knew it. When he saw Sabine bound and struggling, he leaped from his horse and dashed toward her. Before he reached her, the Indian, with a blood curdling yell, sprang upon him and bore him down in a terrible grip.

Sergeant Karet, taken at a disadvantage, was overpowered at first, but so strong and active was he that Ocase was hard put to keep him down. The wiry Frenchman nearly disengaged himself several times, but always the giant strength of Ocase bore him to the ground, and powerful arms tightened about him until he lay at the half-breed's mercy. Karet looked Ocase in the eye, ready to perish as he had lived, without fear.

When Ocase drew his knife Sabine cried and pleaded, but the Indian only gripped the knife tighter.

"You have tried to take my squaw, I take your life. Look at her for the last time. After this knife is buried in your heart I will take her on the trail where she will feed my dogs for me, and nurse my papooses. Look now, for it will be your last."

Karet looked into the pale terrified face of Sabine.

"Sabine, my only love, I adore you. I die for you willingly. Your brother, my good friend, will rescue you from this insufferable coward who would not meet me in fair combat. Farewell, my

love. Now, coward, to the hilt in the heart that loves Sabine."

Sabine attempted to cry out but her voice refused its office. Ocase raised the knife yet higher and poised to strike. The sharp report of a rifle rent the air, and the knife dropped harmlessly to the ground as Ocase sprang to his feet, his hand pressed to his heart.

Across the stream, where a white puff of smoke still floated in the air, stood old Asa Lisso, his long white hair and beard streaming around him as he waved his rifle.

"The seventeenth . . . the seventeenth" he chanted in his cracked old voice.

Ocase looked. A flash of recognition crossed his face, and as the phantom rifleman disappeared, the half-breed, long the terror of the Spanish Trail, fell lifeless at Sabine's feet.

It was but the work of a moment for Sergeant Karet to seize the knife and sever the thongs which held the fainting girl. Sabine, the woman he loved, was held tight in his hungry embrace.

THE END

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